LETTERS

Aligning the Interests of Administration and Faculty to Improve Pharmacy Student Retention

To the Editor. At one time there was a distinction between tuition-driven colleges and schools of pharmacy and those that were not tuition driven. That was yesterday. Today, we're all tuition-driven.

The simple fact is, a tuition-driven business model based on X students paying Y dollars cannot afford to lose very many students. The loss of even a single student can affect a school's business model. Losing several students out of a class can have serious implications because the lost revenue cannot be replaced. It's simply gone.

Most faculty members do not give a lot of thought to their employer's business model. Generally speaking, as long as our paychecks are cashable we feel it's the administration's responsibility to look after the business model and be good stewards of our human and financial resources. As educators and scholars, our role is to be the guardians of academic quality and integrity.

Although the respective roles of faculty and administration are usually in harmony with each other, conflict can arise in circumstances where the actions recommended by the faculty to maintain academic quality have the potential to negatively affect the school's business model. One notable example is when deciding how the school should deal with students who fail to meet academic performance standards and are at risk for dismissal.

Every college and school has a standing committee charged with the responsibility of reviewing the cases of students who are in academic trouble and recommending to administration how best to respond. Never an easy task, this process requires the committee to simultaneously balance the interests of the student with those of the program, including a consideration of the morale of other students and the faculty. In all cases, the faculty and administration are united in one goal: to retain the student in the program if at all possible. This is both a demonstration of shared commitment to the student and recognition of the financial implications that dismissal has for the school.

But while we agree on the goal, we sometimes disagree on the appropriate means to achieve it, especially if it comes down — as it sometimes does — to choosing between 2 undesirable options: compromise our academic standards or request extraordinary effort from faculty members to assist the student to meet the school's standards.

The former is unacceptable to faculty members as we view it to be antithetical to our role as guardians of aca-

ademic quality and a betrayal of the trust placed in us by our colleagues in the profession. The latter can be equally unpalatable in that it may require virtually re-teaching an entire course for a single student who was not failed by the faculty so much as by him or herself. Understandably, the faculty can be resistant to expending extraordinary effort in such circumstances. Thus, the committee and the administration can find themselves at odds in deciding how to proceed.

To solve this dilemma I believe we need to align the economic interests of the faculty with those of the administration. In private universities, many high-ranking administrators receive annual bonuses. These bonuses are based on a variety of performance metrics and tuition revenue is typically one of them. That is, administrators often have a personal financial incentive to maximize student retention. (Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus — at least for academic vice presidents and deans.) In contrast, faculty members have no such incentive.

For a variety of reasons, students in academic trouble cannot always be saved, irrespective of the efforts that the faculty may be willing to make. In some cases their academic problems resulted from personal issues that we cannot influence. In other cases, they were able to slip through our admissions screening only to later demonstrate that they lacked the capacity to successfully complete the program.

However, in some cases the student is salvageable if the faculty is willing to invest the incremental time and effort needed to remediate them. Without extraordinary — sometimes heroic — effort by the faculty, these marginal students and their tuition will otherwise be lost by the college or school. How then do we motivate the faculty to invest this additional time and effort?

One approach would be to provide the faculty with the opportunity to earn a return on their incremental investment of time and effort. What if administration were willing to pool part of the tuition that is saved by salvaging at-risk students and return it to the faculty in the form of bonuses? Realistically, this revenue would otherwise be — and is currently being — lost. Recapturing this lost revenue is only made possible through the extra effort of faculty members, so it seems only fair that they should share in it.

Naturally, there are many ways one could apportion such a bonus but, once again, it's appropriate to consider the underlying business model for guidance. From my perspective, a pharmacy school's business model is pretty simple: we sell credit hours and that's what students buy. Simply stated, the educational role of the faculty is to service those credit hour demands. So, assuming a class size of 150 students at an average of 60 credit hours per

year (15 per academic quarter), faculty members must collectively service a total of 9,000 student credit hours.

Each faculty member's "share" in the student retention bonus could be determined by the proportion of those 9,000 student credit hours they currently service in their annual instruction. For example, a faculty member who teaches a 3-credit course of 150 students is covering 450 student credit hours. This converts to 5% of the total credit hours to be serviced, so their share of the student retention bonus would be set at 5%. If responsibilities for the course were shared 50-50 by 2 faculty members, then each would receive 2.5%, and so on.

Once again, the number of possible alternative approaches for distributing student retention bonuses to members of the faculty is virtually unlimited. The most important considerations are that it be viewed as fair and that it effectively incentivizes the faculty to exert the incremental time and effort needed to save those at-risk students who can be saved.

I tell my students that when someone says "it's not about the money," it's usually a pretty safe bet that it is, at least in part, about the money. This axiom is no less true in education than in every other industry. Unlike other industries, however, faculty members do not directly share in the success of the enterprises they help to build. We don't get bonuses. We don't get stock options. To use the common vernacular, we don't get "a piece of the action."

Perhaps it's time that pharmacy academia acknowledges the elephant in the room when it comes to student retention and talk frankly about the money. Doing so could go a long way toward realigning the interests of faculty and administration relative to salvaging at-risk students. The result would be a win-win-win for all involved.

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