SPECIAL ARTICLE

Building a Multi-Institutional Community of Practice to Foster Assessment

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This paper discusses the development of a multi-institutional community of practice that formed over 5 years. This community of practice was intentionally designed to support the evolution of student learning and programmatic assessment within member colleges and schools. Critical phases to the community's development are outlined, as well as its mission and goals. In addition, the community's contributions to faculty development and the scholarship of assessment are detailed. Success factors are discussed to assist others who may wish to initiate assessment-related collaborations across institutional borders. The community's vision for the future is also outlined.

Keywords: assessment, community of practice, faculty development, scholarship

BACKGROUND

The development and direction of assessment at the institutional, programmatic, and student level within colleges and schools of pharmacy has been significantly influenced by the US Department of Education's 2006 evaluation of the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE), which identified 7 areas where ACPE was partially compliant or noncompliant.¹ In addressing the citations levied by the Department of Education, ACPE strengthened its expectations for well-developed assessment programs and developed rubrics for Standards 2007.² The rubrics codified the expectations for those standards with assessment requirements. ACPE, in collaboration with the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP), also developed survey tools to evaluate the perceptions of graduating pharmacy students, alumni, faculty members, and preceptors.³ The use of longitudinal assessments, such as progress examinations, is now necessary. The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) developed a progress examination based on the Foreign Pharmacy Graduate Equivalency

Examination and piloted it at several colleges and schools in 2005-2006.

These events not only generated national discussion, but also stimulated pharmacy deans to consider methods for better addressing assessment within colleges and schools. The Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) (often referred to by the athletic conference name of the "Big Ten") was providing a means for regular discussion and collaboration among the CIC pharmacy deans. The national discussion related to assessment prompted the CIC pharmacy deans to place the topic of collaborative development of assessment criteria and evaluations on their June 15, 2006, meeting agenda (J. Cohen, Dean, April 21, 2006 e-mail to Deans Roberts, Speedie, Seagraves, Ascione, Brueggemeier, and Pezzuto). The CIC pharmacy programs at the time included Purdue University, The Ohio State University, the University of Illinois-Chicago, the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Wisconsin. (The University of Nebraska was added in 2011.)

The CIC's decision to collaborate evolved from the circumstances in US pharmacy education. However, the consortium or collaborative approach could be helpful in other environments where individual colleges and schools are under pressure to implement broad, new education-related initiatives. In our case, the collaborative approach

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to developing assessment goals, objectives, and instruments was attractive for several reasons. First, a collaborative approach would help to address the looming mandate for new formative and summative assessments in an environment of contracting resources. Second, it provided an independent, expert voice to add to the national discussion. Third, it would offer a model of accountability for colleges and schools of pharmacy located in the participating research-intensive universities.

To begin, the deans identified individuals in their college and school who were primarily responsible for assessment and charged this group to plan a first meeting. The Iowa designates arranged for a meeting of all 7 colleges and schools during the 2006 AACP annual meeting in San Diego, CA. The participants identified common ground and planned a second meeting in January 2007 that was held at the Big Ten Conference Meetings Center and Headquarters Building, in Park Ridge, Illinois. These 2 initial meetings established several logistic characteristics of the working model: 1 college or school would take the lead for organizing activities each year with meetings held each January at the Big Ten Conference facilities and in July at the AACP Annual Meeting.

This paper discusses critical phases of the community's development, its contributions to faculty development and the scholarship of assessment, and its vision for the future. Success factors will be discussed to assist others who may wish to initiate assessment-related collaborations across institutional borders.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE From Reactive to Proactive

While the charge from the deans to the group in 2006 was nonspecific, the general idea was to serve as a catalyst for achievement of assessment goals and to leverage the expertise of the group to provide synergistic responses to what was happening in assessment.

Initially the group was reactive in nature, responding to issues in the assessment environment and/or to requests from their college or school's dean. For example, one of the first activities in 2006 was to prepare a response to ACPE regarding the proposed accreditation standards on behalf of the CIC deans. In addition to twice yearly meetings, monthly conference calls were established. In January 2007, the group began to formalize its activities by identifying 4 specific goals: (1) establish a sustainable structure for a CIC pharmacy assessment consortium; (2) develop an educational outcome research agenda; (3) share resources among group members; and (4) establish a common set of assessment instruments that could be used by all members of the group and also shared with the greater pharmacy community.

The activities of the group slowly evolved as the membership grew based on interest at each member institution. The group also shifted from a reactive group to a more proactive and self-directed group. The work became project oriented. Each year at the annual meeting, members reviewed the list of projects and identified an agenda for the year. The group also became more policy oriented. For example, the group provided feedback to the NABP regarding the Pharmacy Curricular Outcomes Assessment. In addition, the group provided input to AACP supporting the formation of a special interest group on assessment. Over time, the work also shifted and included more of a scholarly focus. Several members of the group have conducted targeted studies to develop and/or evaluate new assessment instruments, presented posters at national meetings regarding the preliminary results of the scholarly works,^{4,5} collaborated on a white paper⁶ and a research paper,⁷ and presented a historical perspective of this collaboration at the 2010 Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Assessment Institute.

Charter Development

In 2010, the group developed a charter (available on request from corresponding author), which allowed the group to formalize its efforts. The obvious benefits of developing a charter included clarification of composition, member roles, and operations. However, it also allowed the discussion and articulation of core values, purpose, and goals for the group. At the conclusion of this work, the group's mission statement was defined as: "Shaping assessment practices for excellence in evidence-based pharmacy education."

Development of the charter also caused the group to reflect on a name. While "consortium" and various other terms that described the group's nature were considered for inclusion, the members felt strongly that the collaborative focus of the group should be reflected in its name. The members also discussed the importance of others easily understanding the name and considered using Big Ten. However, on consultation with the deans, they felt strongly that the academic side of the Big Ten must continue to build its visibility. As a result, the charter marked the official beginning of the CIC Pharmacy Assessment Collaborative (CIC-PAC).

Community of Practice

The process of developing a charter facilitated reflection on the group's past accomplishments. Through this process of reflection, the members recognized that an evolution had occurred from an informal group tasked by the deans to respond to select issues into a community of practice. While there are several definitions of communities of

practice based on social networks, as shared by Wegner, a community of practice is simply a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do, and as the group interacts, they learn how to do it better.⁸

A community of practice is not simply a network of individuals, but rather a group whose identity is defined by a shared area of interest.^{8,9} Membership in a community of practice is based on participation and not official status.⁹ In the case of the CIC-PAC, each of its members has a strong interest and commitment to the field of assessment and in helping move the field forward.

While members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis, the members do build connections and rapport with each other, share information, and assist each other. Moreover the members of a community of practice develop shared resources and experiences to inform and “change” practice. Communities are concerned with producing practical outcomes while simultaneously facilitating learning among members.^{10,11}

The CIC-PAC has evolved to become a group that regularly shares best practices among its members and with the greater assessment community. The collaborative facilitates professional development of its members via informal shared discussions, shared practices, research, journal clubs, and formal presentations by guest speakers. Moreover, the collaborative is focused on the scholarship of assessment and developing practical tools and resources to promote excellence in pharmacy education.

Interestingly, the formation of CIC-PAC unknowingly mirrored the stages of community of practice development described in the literature. This included the potential stage in which the group discovered commonalities (ie, the initial meeting in July 2006), followed by a building stage or coalescence of the group during which connections were explored (eg, initial reactive activities, initial goal setting). The group then shifted into the active phase where members became engaged in developing a practice, and their energy was focused on joint activities (eg, white paper, 2 posters, development of a charter, etc). Communities of practice scholars also describe a final stage of inactivity, referred to as the memorable stage, when members are no longer active.^{9,12}

FACILITATING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Informal Development for Members

After the first meeting, members recognized that they were participating in an endeavor with inspired, like-minded individuals who provided support, ideas, and encouragement for work at their home institution. Although this was not one of the initial goals for participation,

members realized that an opportunity existed to enhance the membership’s professional development in assessment, while accomplishing the other goals and activities of the collaborative. With the rapid expansion of assessment techniques, the pressure to meet new accreditation standards, and the need to operate within resource constraints, timely, focused professional development was needed. Yet, with each member of the collaborative having 1 or 2 faculty members at his or her college or school with some interest in the area of assessment, a significant nucleus did not exist at any one institution to organize and conduct professional development activities in assessment.

The initial participants in the collaborative had a wide variety of experience and expertise in the area of assessment. Some of the colleges had extensive assessment programs in place, while other colleges had programs that were newly started or not fully implemented. Those members new to assessment felt challenged to enhance their knowledge but at no time were made to feel inferior or that their opinions were not valued by the group as a whole. Through sharing of experiences and techniques, more experienced members were able to reflect on the progress of their programs, recognize their accomplishments, and reinvigorate for the next phase of their program’s development.

By the time of the second formal session of the CIC-PAC at the AACCP annual meeting, the group had participated in several monthly phone conferences and participants had developed a sense of the strengths that each member brought to the table. In addition, a trusting relationship had developed between members so ideas, concerns, and future initiatives could be discussed without concerns about parochial barriers. Members quickly offered to share their documents, instruments, references, and cases with other members.

As members became more familiar with each other, each member’s specific areas of expertise became generally understood and members began aligning to work together on projects and future initiatives. This aspect of mutual respect was probably best illustrated by the development of a white paper by several members of the collaborative. Following the first year, another great value that clearly came to the forefront was the ability of any member to pick up the phone and call another and freely ask for advice and feedback regarding college assessment efforts. Informal, just-in-time faculty development was occurring through conversation and sharing.

Structured Development for Members

Initially, the collaborative was not focused on addressing barriers to more structured faculty development for

its members. An editorial by Medina, Garrison, and Brazeau¹³ outlined the challenges of developing and gaining sustained participation in professional development programs for faculty members. Professional development often takes a back seat to other demands. As the collaborative moved into its third year of existence, members saw the need for more programming related to assessment at the annual AACP meeting and formally encouraged AACP to start a special interest group on assessment. In addition, the group also identified the value of its members attending national assessment conferences and meetings, such as the IUPUI Assessment Conference held annually in Indianapolis. Being a regionally located meeting, almost all colleges and schools have sent at least 1 member to participate since 2009.

However, local, regular opportunities for faculty development were also desired to elevate and evolve the assessment practices of members. Indeed, MacKinnon¹⁴ reported that 1 of 3 primary motivators reported by faculty members for engaging in faculty development was to improve the quality of work. To address the desire to help evolve assessment related work, a monthly assessment journal club was started separate from the monthly phone conferences in the collaborative's fifth year. Several members began this initiative by reading a text on portfolios that was then discussed in a series of monthly journal club meetings. The members currently select a journal club topic for each quarter. In addition to portfolios, topics that have been covered include providing feedback to students and encouraging faculty and student affairs involvement in assessment. Reviewing the articles allows members to be exposed to a broader pallet of the assessment literature and to become familiar with assessment related journals outside of pharmacy, such as *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*¹⁵ and *Assessment Update*,¹⁶ as well as sources such as the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's Occasional Papers.¹⁷ With these phone conferences preset and listed on members' schedules, members are encouraged to integrate the journal club into their work as their workload permits in any given month. An average of 4 to 5 members participate in the monthly journal club meeting.

Development for Faculty Members

In MacKinnon's study of dean and administrator perceptions of faculty development, administrator respondents reported that the most pressing need for faculty development was in the area of "assessment tools for testing competency and outcomes."¹⁸ This need was reported even more frequently than grantsmanship and manuscript writing by dean respondents. CIC-PAC members

also perceived this need and wanted to facilitate assessment-related faculty development among the faculty of the member colleges and schools.

As the work of the collaborative progressed, the group reached out to encourage a broader engagement of faculty members in development-oriented programs that were directly relevant to facilitating the evolution of participants' assessment-related work. In January 2009, experiential directors and coordinators from each college and school were asked to participate in the annual CIC-PAC meeting on IPPE assessment. During this meeting, subgroups were established to develop and fine tune assessment instruments for skill areas such as communications and professionalism. Although it was common for experiential program directors within a state to meet on a regular basis to discuss issues related to introductory and advanced pharmacy practice experiences (IPPEs and APPEs), this meeting provided an opportunity for experiential program colleagues to establish connections between states.

Faculty and staff members from each college and school involved in the development and implementation of performance-based assessments were invited to the 2011 CIC-PAC Annual Meeting. These individuals met both separately and with the core CIC group to discuss opportunities for development and validation of performance-based assessments among the member colleges and schools. In addition to the benefits of sharing related to performance-based assessments, many faculty participants were associated with patient care laboratories. A half day was made available to facilitate networking around laboratory-related issues. A follow-up meeting of the performance-based assessments group was planned for the subsequent AACP annual meeting. The goal is that this group, who for the most part were not collaborating prior to this meeting, will continue to work on their own and in concert with the CIC-PAC because of their key role in the overall assessment process.

SCHOLARSHIP AND INNOVATION

Consistent with development as a community of practice, the CIC-PAC has engaged in numerous collaborative assessment projects. Work in this area began when the group responded to a request for proposals by AACP to produce an assessment-related white paper for the 2009 AACP Curriculum Change Summit. Work continues on projects related to professionalism, communication, and engagement. Future scholarship related to performance-based assessments and continuing professional development is under discussion. Scholarship and innovation are considered vital to the group's mission to shape assessment practices for excellence in evidence-based pharmacy education.

The CIC-PAC has coordinated the development of the Professionalism Assessment Tool (PAT), which was designed to help address some of the difficulties that member colleges and schools had experienced with existing tools, such as ceiling effects. Initially, the PAT was administered at 4 colleges of pharmacy. The results of the initial assessment were presented at the 2010 AACP annual meeting in Seattle, Washington.⁵ After the meeting, it was administered with first- and third-year students at 7 schools. The development and cross-validation of the professionalism tool has been completed.⁷

Members of the CIC-PAC have developed a communication rubric and tested it at 2 colleges of pharmacy.⁴ The goal is to have other colleges test and assess this rubric. Both the communication rubric and the professionalism tool were initiated at the 2009 joint meeting of the CIC-PAC and experiential directors.

The collaborative also formed a partnership with a graduate student from the University of Kansas who was interested in analyzing the relationship between engagement and professionalism as part of her dissertation. With this support, a pharmacy-specific revision to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was accomplished at the 2010 CIC-PAC Annual Meeting and administered along with the PAT in 7 colleges and schools in spring 2010.

SUCCESS FACTORS

The implementation of the CIC-PAC has gone surprisingly well. Minor, typical challenges have been encountered. For instance, there have been a few membership changes due to changes in roles within member colleges and schools or movement of members to other institutions. In addition, some workload challenges have been encountered when several member colleges and schools were preparing for accreditation review at about the same time. However, the size and will of the group has allowed these challenges to be traversed with minimal difficulty.

The success of any group is greatly influenced by how they organize and “lead” their efforts. The CIC-PAC chose a rotating leadership schedule whereby each college

and school takes turns organizing the group for a 12-month period (July-June). Leadership duties include: scheduling group meetings (via conference calls and in person), setting the agendas for meetings, and recording minutes of proceedings. Participating colleges and schools share the costs for meetings (food and supplies) on the same rotation schedule followed by the leadership (ie, when a University of Michigan faculty member is chair, then University of Michigan sponsors the costs of the meetings). To facilitate more seamless transitions of leadership, the rotation of chairs is decided for 2 years at a time to enable the current chair and the subsequent chair to work together on transition of leadership duties.

Membership in the group is open to any faculty or staff member at a CIC college or school of pharmacy who has an interest in or responsibility for assessment efforts at their respective college or school. As a result, the number of members per school ranges from 1 to 3. Each school has a member who is responsible for assessment administratively. Additional members may include additional assessment administrators, faculty chairs of assessment committees, and/or faculty members with scholarly interests in assessment. Individual travel costs are the responsibility of each participating college or school.

Decisions about the projects the group will work on in the coming year are made by all members at the July meeting. An annual report and goals for the year are also shared and discussed with the CIC deans at this time. Over the years the number of members has expanded, thus allowing for a subcommittee approach to projects. Table 1 presents a listing of the group’s activities and their frequency.

Members of the CIC- PAC use Dropbox (Dropbox Inc, San Francisco, CA) to assist the group with storage of business-related information (eg, meeting minutes, journal club information, manuscript drafts). In addition, the group plans to construct a Web site for the CIC-PAC and is looking into various external technologies to host this site.

As faculty and staff members at research intensive public institutions, the similarities of the colleges and

Table 1. Logistical Considerations in Managing the Committee on Institutional Cooperation Pharmacy Assessment Collaborative

Activity	Frequency	Explanation
Leadership	Rotates by school annually	Chair and upcoming chair work together
In person meetings	2-3 times per year	Locations include Chicago, AACP Meetings, and other national meetings
Conference calls	Monthly	Keeps projects moving
Journal club	Monthly	Professional development for members
Assessment initiatives	Ongoing	Projects selected annually and small teams volunteer to guide
Scholarly projects	Ongoing	Projects selected annually and small teams volunteer to guide
Advocacy	As needed	Topics generated by the group or requested by the deans group

schools' missions creates many important commonalities. For example, the demands and expectations of faculty members at these 7 institutions are similar. The group strongly believes that these unifying characteristics are helpful in communication and sharing, as well as successful collaboration.

In addition to accomplishing its charges, the group initially spent time getting to know one another and each college and school's program. This resulted in a level of familiarity and trust that supported further networking and communication among the members. In continuing to build relationships and working groups, ample, regular communication was an asset. It is rare when a school is not represented on a monthly teleconference.

Often, assessment personnel can feel isolated or that they have no one at their home institution with whom to discuss ideas or problem solve. The CIC-PAC has provided a forum for such problem solving. At any time at least 6 other schools are a phone call or e-mail away. These consults have often led to "consulting visits" by members to the other CIC schools. These shared struggles and problem-solving sessions, along with the regularly scheduled meetings and calls, have provided the foundation for strong professional ties within the group. There is a passion and connectedness of the members that transcends the formal working relationship that was formed by the deans in 2006.

While the CIC deans drew the CIC-PAC together and charged it with its first tasks, they also allowed the group to identify its own issues and areas of interest. Continued administrative support from each dean has nurtured the group's cohesiveness and trust. Ongoing financial support has allowed the CIC-PAC to continue to meet face-to-face twice annually, which has allowed important dialogue and debate, as well as work time. In addition, annual reports from the CIC-PAC to the CIC deans has facilitated awareness of accomplishments and shared strategic goal setting.

Considerations

Based on the experiences of the formation of the CIC-PAC, the following are important considerations for any group considering a similar venture.

- Who are the collaborators? How are these collaborators currently linked or what similarities do they share?
- What are the common goals or needs that the group will address?
- Who are the administrative sponsors for the group (if needed) and how will they interact with the collaborative?
- What are the membership criteria? Are there membership or participation restrictions?

- How will the group be led? What process will be adopted for leadership changes over time?
- How will funding be provided?
- How often and in what manner do the members wish to meet?

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The CIC-PAC has established a foundation from which to make significant contributions in furthering the assessment agenda in pharmacy education as well as potentially the broader education environment. While it is difficult to predict exactly how the CIC-PAC will evolve, several possibilities present themselves.

Within the members' own institutions, the work of the CIC-PAC is serving, and will continue to serve, a role in establishing the legitimacy of efforts to develop quality assessment programs within the member colleges and schools of pharmacy. Faculty members are often convinced that initiatives that draw on best practices from peer institutions carry more weight than "home grown" approaches to assessment that have no external validation.

Efforts derived from the accomplishments of the CIC-PAC are having an impact, not just on the member colleges and schools of pharmacy, but also within the members' home universities as well. CIC-PAC members have taken on leadership roles in university-wide assessment efforts at member institutions, and products of the activities of the CIC-PAC have the potential to serve as models of best practices for assessment within other institutions.

Within academic pharmacy, the CIC-PAC members have the experience and expertise to establish assessment practice standards within the academy. Individually and collectively, the CIC-PAC has the opportunity to influence the direction and activities of the AACP Assessment Special Interest Group and help drive the scholarship of assessment in pharmacy. By demonstrating uniform methods for assessment across the member institutions, the efforts of the CIC-PAC also have the potential to influence the ACPE evaluation rubric with respect to expectations for a quality assessment system.

The CIC-PAC group aspires to establish linkages with other pharmacy assessment collaboratives that are in the process of developing. This could even be broadened beyond pharmacy as other health professions are addressing similar issues within the realm of assessment. Groups of pharmacy, nursing, medical, and dental colleges and schools could get together to share challenges and best practices. Perhaps a "collaborative of collaboratives" could evolve around the topic of assessment.

From a broader perspective, the CIC-PAC can function as a model for the conduct of multi-institutional collaborations in a variety of areas within pharmacy, not just

assessment. The CIC itself has a long tradition of mutual support and assistance related to the mission of our institutions. There are numerous CIC peer groups that coalesce around an interest area, self-organize, and get together to share ideas and best practices. The pharmacy CIC group is an exemplar of a peer group approach that could be applied to a number of issues within academic pharmacy. Peer group collaborations could be formed around a variety of topics including the curriculum, experiential education, substance misuse, development, financial affairs, faculty development, etc.

SUMMARY

This article provides an overview of a multi-institution collaboration designed for the purpose of facilitating the advancement of assessment with member colleges and schools of pharmacy. Factors influencing the CIC-PAC's initiation, success factors in its development, and insights from the literature on communities of practice are provided to assist others in identifying and fostering opportunities for cross-institution collaboration for the purpose of advancing higher education. Work in faculty development and the scholarship of assessment is shared to illustrate the power of a multi-institutional collaborative focused on evolving assessment practices.

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