VIEWPOINTS

Rules of the Road

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Discussions at the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) interim meeting in February 2012 highlighted some of the challenges faced by prospective students as they evaluate options for professional education. As an academy, we present an exciting, but often confusing array of education models from which students can choose. It is time to establish guidelines by which institutions will cooperate to facilitate the best possible match between student and professional program. In admissions vernacular, these guidelines are referred to as “traffic rules.”

The ease by which students can indicate interest in multiple professional programs, coupled with an increasing diversity of educational models, has provided both students and institutions a chance to discover and learn about each other more effectively than previously seen in the academy. On one hand, this is an exciting opportunity that should facilitate the best match between institution and student. Conversely, it creates an unpredictable landscape characterized by students “hedging their bets” as colleges and schools scramble to fast-track evaluation processes, and institutions vainly attempt to control a dynamic environment using a combination of “carrot” (marketing) and “stick” (admissions deposits).

Proposed “traffic rules” would establish a date before which a student could not be required to commit to an institution with a deposit. Colleges and schools of pharmacy would still be allowed to make offers of admission at any time. Students could voluntarily choose to accept an offer of admission and provide a deposit as soon as they were comfortable with their selection. Colleges and schools of pharmacy, however, would agree not to require deposits, or provide other enticements, prior to a specific date. While students could still choose to accept multiple offers of admissions, they would be advised that efforts to retrieve deposits after the specific deposit date would be considered a violation of the PharmCAS Applicant Code of Conduct.

Traffic rules are not new to higher education. Residency programs accredited by the American Association of Medical Colleges,¹ the Council of Graduate Schools,² and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists,³ among others, have long-established guidelines that describe processes similar to those proposed for pharmacy admissions. The guidelines are valued because they allow institutions to conduct a deliberative admissions process without artificial time constraints. A well-defined playing field allows all institutions to use interview processes that recognize that both the student and institution have an opportunity to distinguish themselves based on their unique merits. Adequate time is available to evaluate recent academic performance or request additional information from potentially outstanding students whose strengths are less evident. Perhaps most importantly, institutions can actively recruit those students identified in interviews as being a strong fit for their program.

The student perspective is simply one of fairness and respect. Where to pursue a degree is likely one of the most important decisions a student will make. It has significant professional and financial implications that extend well beyond their years in the program. We should respect the significance of their decision, provide a reasonable amount of time for students to explore unique aspects of individual professional programs, and then encourage them to make the decision that is best for them. It is simply unfair to require a student to commit to a program before they can assemble the data needed to make an informed decision, and it is difficult to imagine that an admissions deposit would drive the behavior of an informed consumer making a \$100,000+ decision. Our institutions benefit financially by forcing students to make poorly informed, early commitments and pay non-refundable deposits, but there is no purpose to which funds from early admissions deposits could be allocated that would rationalize or justify the requirement. Stated bluntly, continuing this behavior shows our lack of respect for our future colleagues and our lack of confidence in the quality of our individual professional programs.

Rules of the road that regulate drivers do not have to be followed to move an automobile from one location to another. However, traffic rules do facilitate smoother

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transitions and, in many respects, define a standard of behavior to which we, as a society, aspire. The academy will likely have an opportunity to establish our own “rules of the road” for admissions at the 2012 AACP Annual Meeting in Kissimmee, FL, during the House of Delegates session. In a profession and academy that routinely cloaks itself in ethics, empathy, and duty to others before self, it seems reasonable that we choose to afford our future colleagues the courtesy of adequate time to explore how to best advance their education, and consequently our profession, without penalty.

REFERENCES

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