VIEWPOINT

The Disconnect

Frank Romanelli, PharmD, MPH

University of Kentucky College of Pharmacy, Lexington, Kentucky
Associate Editor, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*

Recently, an attorney contacted me to request a consult on a judicial case involving lethal injection litigation. We spoke briefly over the phone regarding the case and its nuances and then the conversation shifted to a topic the attorney seemed even more enthusiastic to discuss. The law office had run a background check and also pulled previously published manuscripts as they were trying to identify a pharmacotherapy expert in the area of lethal injection. The attorney told me she was fascinated by a paper that I published with two other colleagues at the University of Kentucky (UK).

At this point I essentially knew the direction of the conversation as similar exchanges occurred on a semi-regular basis following the 2012 publication of the paper titled “Academic Entitlement in Pharmacy Education.”¹ The manuscript generated a great deal of discussion, debate, and controversy.¹⁻³ Based on both formal and informal feedback the authors received, faculty members across the academy generally embraced most elements of the paper, in many ways rallying around several central messages. Particular attention was given to the perceived level of entitlement among pharmacy students and students in general as well as potential mitigating factors for these sentiments.

A contrasting phenomenon occurred at UK. Following recognition and citation of the manuscript on the school’s website, a much different reaction came from our students. A viral social media response to the paper quickly spread through the university culminating in a feature article in the university’s campus newspaper.⁴ We, the authors, quickly became adversaries of many students who considered us to have “thrown student pharmacists under the bus.” The common and visceral student response was “this is not us.” In their defense, the paper was not about every pharmacy student or health professions student for that matter. It was meant to address a rising concern among faculty members within the health professions and within general education.

The student response to the publication was, in all my time as a faculty member, the single most passionate and unified front I have ever seen from this cohort. Even though the paper had been published 3 years before and

most students who had attended the school at that time had moved on, echoes of dissent and discontent remained in the hallways. Students often commented that the cadre of traits and qualities enjoined by the term “entitled” did not seem to describe them or any of their immediate peers. To the contrary, students retorted that they often managed heavy class loads and work commitments while participating in extracurricular activities and inheriting significant debt. Many were personally offended at the thought of anyone (much less faculty members or administrators) considering them entitled. Students commented that the entitlement debate was two-sided and that, in turn, faculty members and academic institutions must also be held to high standards in terms of teaching quality, emotional intelligence, and admissions.⁵

What was and does remain most startling to me is the sheer dichotomy between faculty and student perceptions. There was little gray area or middle ground between the two factions. I was reminded of this once again in the course of my interaction with the consulting attorney. A part-time instructor herself, she was caught by the paper’s title and found that its contents resonated with the feelings of most of her teaching peers. In our conversations, I explained that in most cases students did not frame this issue with the same presumptions and opinions as faculty members did.

This dichotomy has for me called into question how I think and how I approach students. There is a definite disconnect between how students perceive faculty members and how faculty members perceive students. Somewhere along this continuum lies reality. What reality actually is may be less important than the fact that this disconnect exists. Perhaps, as class sizes have swelled and the number of schools increased nationally, the divide between faculty members and students has grown. In my own teaching, I find myself struggling to learn student names, hometowns, and other personal traits that I familiarized myself with when class sizes were smaller.

Recognizing students’ names and some personal information about them helped to establish a more intimate teacher-student relationship. As in patient care, there is little question regarding the power of relationships.

People look for a provider who knows them by name, recognizes them at the grocery store, understands their personal history, and uses this knowledge to guide care of the patient.⁶ We take pride in telling others “that’s my provider.”

When faculty members develop professional relationships with students, they can more authentically assess progress, they are more likely to develop genuine mentoring relationships, and, by simply demonstrating they care, they may influence the course of a student’s career. Class sizes may also influence the number and types of relationships students enter into with each other. The class size debate across the academy will likely continue. Compelling evidence to reduce class sizes is replete in primary and secondary education.⁷ There are realities school administrators face in determining class size, which are influenced by myriad factors, ultimately including the financial well-being of the institution. In all likelihood, “the disconnect” between faculty members and

students is a multi-faceted phenomenon. It is difficult, however, to easily discount ballooning class size.

REFERENCES

1. Cain J, Romanelli F, Smith KM. Academic entitlement in pharmacy education. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2012;76(10):Article 189.
2. Holdford DA. Is a pharmacy student the customer or the product? *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2014;78(1): Article 3.
3. Cain J, Noel Z, Smith KM, Romanelli F. Four rights of the pharmacy educational consumer. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2014;78(6): Article 15.
4. Wells M. Pharmacy professor says article not about UK students. <http://kykernel.com/2013/04/09/pharmacy-professor-says-article-not-about-uk-students/>. Accessed October 20, 2015.
5. Karpen S. Academic entitlement: a student’s perspective. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2014;78(2):Article 44.
6. Leahy M, Cullen W, Bury G. “What makes a good doctor?” A cross sectional survey of public opinion. *Ir Med J.* 2003;96(2):38-41.
7. Mosteller F. The Tennessee study of class size in the early school grades. *The Future of Children – Critical Issues for Children and Youths.* 1995;5(2). http://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/05_02_08.pdf. Accessed October 20, 2015.