SPECIAL ARTICLE

A Novel Education and Training Program to Enhance Student Advocacy

Alex J. Adams, PharmD, MPH^a Gary R. Matzke, PharmD^b Kenneth L. McCall, BSP Pharm, PharmD^c

^a At time of writing, National Association of Chain Drug Stores, Arlington, Virginia

^b Virginia Commonwealth University School of Pharmacy, Richmond, Virginia

^c University of New England College of Pharmacy, Portland, Maine

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Objective. To develop and implement a unique student advocacy program to train student pharmacists to be effective advocates for the profession of pharmacy and the patients it serves.

Design. The Academy is a 2-day program hosted annually in Washington, DC, that combines didactic presentations on the legislative process, communication with policymakers, current legislation, and active-learning exercises such as mock congressional visits. The Academy culminates with visits to Capitol Hill where students meet with legislators and their staff to discuss pending legislation.

Assessment. Nearly 350 students from 43 schools and colleges of pharmacy completed the program in its 4 years. Students are assessed following the active-learning exercises and meetings with legislators.

Conclusion. Advocacy has been listed as a competency that requires more attention in pharmacy education. The Academy provides a model that schools may replicate to enhance their advocacy offerings.

Keywords: Legislative Day, legislative advocacy, pharmacy policy

INTRODUCTION

As the pharmacy profession continues to expand its role in direct patient care, its ability to do so will be determined, in part, by legislation and regulations across all levels of government.¹ A white paper for the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Curricular Change Summit in 2009 by Jungnickel and colleagues proposed that curricula of the future foster the development of “leadership and advocacy.”² Advocacy has been deemed an “essential competence” for pharmacists, a sentiment reflected in the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) accreditation standards for doctor of pharmacy programs.^{3,4} As part of the guidance and key elements for accreditation, ACPE notes that students should have an opportunity to participate in legislative events and legislative advocacy letter-writing campaigns. Further, the entry-level competencies needed for community and ambulatory care practice lists the ability to “embrace and advocate changes that improve patient care.”⁴

Advocacy was listed as a competency that requires more attention in pharmacy education as ACPE explored its next wave of accreditation standards.^{2,5} Some schools of pharmacy have incorporated advocacy electives into the curriculum.⁶⁻¹⁰ Others have created advocacy opportunities as part of their experiential programs, research

initiatives, and extracurricular activities.¹¹ Still, academy leaders have indicated more work needs to be done to systematically increase policy analysis and advocacy training for students.¹²⁻¹⁶

In 2010, the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS) launched an in-person student advocacy training program to help fill this gap. The student program was integrated into NACDS’ Day on Capitol Hill, an annual event that convenes pharmacy advocates in Washington, DC, to meet with their legislators and advocate for an expanded role of pharmacists in health care and for policy solutions that advance patient outcomes and a healthier society. The Academy is a student program that aims to train the next generation of leaders and advocates for the profession of pharmacy. In its first 4 years, the Academy has trained nearly 350 student pharmacists from 43 schools of pharmacy. The objective of this program is to equip student pharmacists with the skills necessary to be effective advocates for the profession of pharmacy.

STRUCTURE OF THE ACADEMY PROGRAM

The Academy is held in conjunction with NACDS’ Day on Capitol Hill, a preexisting event attended by pharmacy industry leaders and state association executives. The Academy is hosted in a conference room of a hotel close to Capitol Hill, providing easy access to meetings with legislators and their staff. Following the completion of the Academy, students participate in the broader program

that includes a networking reception and dinner the first night, followed by a breakfast briefing and full day of appointments on Capitol Hill on the second day. A competitive application process is used to select students for the Academy. Interested students from any professional year of pharmacy school are invited to submit an online application outlining their interest in advocacy and desire to participate in the event. Student selections are made based on the application content, while balancing geographic representation. Participants includes a diverse mix of students from first professional year through the final professional year.

Through this 2-day program, student pharmacists receive hands-on advocacy experience through background readings, didactic lectures, active-learning exercises, networking opportunities with pharmacy leaders, and a full-day experiential component during which teams of pharmacists and student pharmacists meet with legislators and their staff to discuss current pharmacy legislative issues. Selected students are provided background materials created by NACDS in advance of the in-person program that cover the process of a bill becoming a law, legislative terms, getting started/involved, effective communication with policymakers, and handling meeting scenarios and relationships after meeting.¹⁷⁻²²

Since the primary focus of the Academy is to ensure student pharmacists are adequately prepared for their appointments with legislators and their staff, one component of advocacy fundamentals is geared toward “demystifying” the Hill visit experiences. In addition, an emphasis on the fundamentals of advocacy and building a skill set for lifelong advocacy are maintained throughout the educational experience. One presentation focuses on how to communicate complex pharmacy issues to a nonpharmacy audience, avoiding jargon and acronyms, and how to talk about the unique value pharmacy brings to the health care system. Another presentation is delivered by a current congressional staffer who is asked to provide a candid representation of a typical day in a congressional office with a focus on helping students identify ways to cut through the clutter. The remainder of the Academy is devoted to an active-learning exercise. A brief presentation is made regarding a current pharmacy issue with legislation introduced in Congress, which students will discuss as part of their Hill meetings. In 2013, the focus was H.R.1024, the Medication Therapy Management (MTM) Empowerment Act of 2013. Legislation regarding MTM has been a constant emphasis of the Academy since its inception.

After the presentation, breakout groups led by school faculty facilitators engage students in mock Hill visits. Students are paired within groups of 6 to 7, and given a legislator’s biography. They are also given the full text

of a targeted bill. Student groups are given 10 minutes to prepare for the mock visit and are asked to tailor the message to their specific legislator, factoring in party affiliation, voting history, and committee assignments, among other factors. After the preparatory phase, faculty facilitators in the role of legislators engage students in a 10-minute mock congressional meeting.

As students deliver their pro-pharmacy message, the facilitator asks typical questions (eg, “How much will this bill cost?” and “How will this bill affect my constituency”) to ensure students consider the legislation from many angles. Faculty facilitators may also attempt to steer students off course, by, for example, focusing on nonrelated policy issues. Scenarios are also used to make student groups aware of common occurrences on the Hill, such as the legislator leaving after a brief period and a legislative assistant taking the remainder of the meeting, or having a brief standing meeting with the legislator in a hallway. The active-learning experience is designed to expose students to best-case and worst-case scenarios so they remain flexible and stay on target in their actual Hill meetings.

After the afternoon Academy, students join other participants of Hill Day, which includes a networking reception and dinner. Other participants include senior executives of chain drug stores, state pharmacy association executives, and other pharmacy advocates. In the broader program, participants are assigned to a team with other attendees from their state or region for appointments with legislators and their staff. Each student team is led by an experienced advocacy leader. Team leaders lead their group around Capitol Hill to meetings with legislators and their staff, and provide insight and perspective to the team following meetings. At the end of each Hill meeting, a leave-behind packet of information on pro-pharmacy issues is left for each congressional office. Standardized evaluation forms are provided to each team to collect notes on the appointment and document any follow-up actions that may be necessary.

After the end of the 2-day program, a certificate of participation is provided to all student attendees. Within one week, a debrief e-mail is sent to all student pharmacists with suggested ways to continue making an impact, such as writing a letter-to-the-editor of a local newspaper and sending thank you e-mails to legislators.

CHALLENGES AND IMPROVEMENTS TO THE PROGRAM

The Academy has been refined continuously over the years to ensure it best meets the goal of developing leaders and advocates for the pharmacy profession. One area that has evolved significantly is student recruitment and participation. In 2010, the Academy featured

49 student participants from 12 schools of pharmacy. The following year, 159 students from 30 schools of pharmacy participated.

The growth of student participation in the Academy and Hill Day was exciting and encouraging, but it was not without practical challenges. There were capacity constraints with the venue, and the large number of participants also decreased the ability of each student to actively contribute to the Hill meetings, as most meetings are short (generally 15 minutes or fewer). With these factors in mind, a new approach was adopted in 2012, which focused on “smart sizing” the student population. Thus, a competitive application process was adopted with a goal of recruiting roughly 50 students.

Based on feedback provided by participants in 2010 and 2011, the sequencing of the curriculum was changed to a more logical progression from getting involved in advocacy, communicating complex issues, navigating Capitol Hill, and closing with the active-learning exercises. The length of time allocated to active-learning experiences has also increased.

Students were given direct feedback on their participation throughout the program. Following the Academy’s active-learning exercise, facilitators of the mock Hill visits provided direct feedback to the student group and offered suggestions to streamline communications and enhance message delivery. Similar feedback was provided by the team leader following each meeting with legislators and/or their staff.

A major focus of the program was measuring the output of student participants, both directly and indirectly. The students and other participants in the event were welcomed in the official congressional record by Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT).²³ In 2013, teams met with more than 400 US senators and representatives, as well as 89% of members who serve on key committees with jurisdiction on health care issues, such as the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, and the Committee on Finance, among others. This was higher coverage than in previous years, both in terms of the number of meetings (350 in 2012, 255 in 2011) and key committee members targeted (86% in 2012, 70% in 2011). This growth was a result in part of efforts to recruit students from a wider variety of states.

Several students described the experience as “transformative.” One described it as “the most inspiring leadership development experience I have ever had.” Another student remarked 2 years after completing the program: “I need to thank NACDS for showing me how advocacy is done right. Since I’ve returned, I’ve made it a goal to improve the advocacy efforts on campus and throughout the state. I attribute my strong desire and the need to keep

pushing students and pharmacists in our state to what I learned and experienced in DC.”

One major push for follow-up action is for students to broadly communicate their experiences in order to alert other student pharmacists to the value of participating in advocacy. To date, more than 20 student-led articles have appeared in various publications.²⁴⁻⁴¹ At least 3 schools have adopted or explored adoption of an elective course on advocacy, partially as a result of student feedback stemming from participation in the program.

DISCUSSION

The participation in the Academy of 43 schools of pharmacy validates the need for active involvement in legislative affairs and advocacy learning experiences. Bzowyckyj and Janke developed a consensus definition and core competencies for advocacy.⁴² Their definition for advocacy for the pharmacy profession is “an ongoing commitment to advancing the awareness of the value that a pharmacist provides to the health and wellbeing of society by actively supporting and communicating that vision concisely to opinion leaders, elected officials, decision makers, potential partners, and any other audience to influence their perspective and ultimately have them speak and/or act on your behalf.”⁴²

Pharmacy advocacy is also about addressing health care and public health issues from the perspective of a health professional with the primary goal of improving the health of the population. The 2 competency statements that attained consensus by Bzowyckyj and Janke were to “demonstrate the importance of engagement and involvement within the profession” and “employ excellent communication skills.”⁴² The consensus definition and competencies harmonize well with the Academy and will help guide the learning objectives of future events.

The power of the Academy goes well beyond the event day itself on Capitol Hill. Student participation in these Capitol Hill visits culminate in specific legislative request (eg, an “ask”) and the delivery of supporting documentation. However, what students take away from these meetings could be more important than what they leave behind. This experience enables students to expand their viewpoints through interactions with legislators, legislative staff, pharmacy industry leaders, state association executives, and students and faculty members from other schools of pharmacy.

Ongoing advocacy efforts by all pharmacists is a critical means of achieving a permissive environment for pharmacy innovation.⁴³ As evidenced by many resulting publications, students bring this transformative experience back to their campus, which helps to foster a culture of advocacy in their professional community.²⁴⁻⁴¹ To further enhance this aspect of the program, a documented

reflection activity may be helpful from all students in the future. Another consideration may be a “train-the-trainer” approach targeted at pharmacy faculty members to broaden the impact and further address the ACPE Standards relevant to advocacy for the pharmacy profession.

CONCLUSION

The Academy provides an opportunity for student pharmacists to obtain training in advocacy with both didactic and experiential content. The program may be replicable by schools of pharmacy and state associations to augment and optimize student participation in their own legislative events and foster student advocacy development. To advance practice in today’s rapidly changing health care environment, a critical mass of pharmacists is needed to advocate for the profession and the patients it serves. This unique training and education program is one novel means to ensure the next generation of pharmacy advocates is adequately prepared for this professional role.

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