

Research

Evaluating the online networking relationships between preceptors and pharmacy students

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Abstract

Objective: To describe pharmacy preceptors' use of Facebook and compare the perspectives of those with and without Facebook profiles regarding student–preceptor relationships.

Methods: A survey was sent electronically to pharmacy practice preceptors ($n = 2523$) at four colleges of pharmacy asking them to provide their opinions on the student–preceptor Facebook relationship. If respondents answered “yes” to having a Facebook profile, they were asked 12 questions. If respondents answered “no”, they were asked two questions. Demographic data were collected from all the respondents. Two reminder emails were sent before the survey closed after 24 days.

Results: Of the 612 total respondents (response rate = 24.3%), 413 preceptors (67%) currently maintain a Facebook page, while 199 (33%) do not. The majority of those with a Facebook profile (93%) use it for social networking, 27% use it for professional networking or campaigning, and 6% use it to collaborate with colleagues. Fifty-four percent of the preceptors with a Facebook profile are not friends with students on Facebook, while 46% are, although 10% of responders do limit what the student can view on their profile. Responses were highly varied when asked how they would handle a “friend request,” including accept it right away, after some thought, or simply decline it.

Conclusion: As the use of these social media sites increases, the need arises for preceptors to discuss and/or clearly define the appropriateness of social networking relationships without compromising the line between the personal and professional relationships with pharmacy students.

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Introduction/Background

The use of Facebook (Facebook Inc, Palo Alto, CA) is extensive in today's world. It is reported to be the most preferred social networking site amongst college students with up to 90% of US college students having a profile.¹ In professional education, many issues arise with the

widespread use of social networking. As described by Cain, these include professionalism, privacy and more.¹ The literature is ever-growing addressing these pertinent issues. Most of this literature addresses issues from the student perspective; there is less research from the non-student perspective.

College students are not the only ones using this online social network. Facebook is popular amongst many younger and older individuals as well. For the typical pharmacy student, this “older” group can include potential employers, practitioners, faculty and preceptors for their experiential

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activities. Alkhateeb et al. identified that 50% of pharmacists at a state pharmacy association meeting frequently used Facebook.² Interestingly, the preceptors reported using Facebook more for personal than professional or educational purposes. These results are similar to the recent report by Kukreja et al. who queried practicing pharmacy preceptors from Purdue on their current use patterns of Facebook. The majority of preceptors (60%) had a Facebook account and used it primarily for social, not professional, purposes.³ While Kukreja et al. evaluated the use of social media by pharmacy preceptors, they did not assess the relationship between students and preceptors regarding social media.

When a mixture of generations participate in online social networks, the issue of relationship boundaries arises. Metzger et al. recently described the online social networking relationship from a pharmacy faculty member's perspective.⁴ Nearly half (46%) of the responding faculty had Facebook profiles. Though some faculty members were friends with their students, none initiated the "friend request" with current students. There seemed to be a hesitancy/uneasiness from some faculty about being friends with students. A paper by Schneider et al. found similar faculty perceptions using a different methodology.⁵ Reacting to three student–faculty social interaction scenarios, faculty/administrator focus groups at six colleges of pharmacy had concerns that faculty members initiating a Facebook "friend request" violated social boundaries with students.

While understanding the student–faculty relationship in online networks is important, so too is the student–preceptor relationship considering the amount of time students spend on experiential rotations with preceptors. Standard 10 of the accreditation standards and guidelines set forth by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) states that devoted curricular time should be no less than 5% for introductory pharmacy practice experiences (IPPEs) and no less than 25% for advanced pharmacy practice experiences (APPEs).⁶ In contrast to student–faculty interactions in lectures or even recitations/case conferences, these student–preceptor interactions are typically in much smaller groups as precepting is typically done one-on-one or two-on-one.

Rationale/Objectives

This is the second project for a recently developed Practice/Teaching-Based Research Network at four Ohio colleges of pharmacy. The purpose of this project is to describe pharmacy preceptor use of Facebook and compare the perspectives of those with and without Facebook profiles regarding student–preceptor relationships.

Materials/Methods

An electronic survey (Appendix 1) using the online system Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Inc, Provo, UT) was sent to APPE and IPPE preceptors that were affiliated with four

colleges of pharmacy. Preceptors were defined as individuals with contract agreements at one or more of the four colleges of pharmacy that accept students for APPE or IPPE rotations. Full-time faculty members that teach on campus a majority of their time were excluded from the study. Preceptors were asked to provide their opinions on the preceptor–student relationship on Facebook. If preceptors answered "yes" to having an online profile, they were asked a series of 12 questions on various aspects of being friends with current and former students. If preceptors answered "no", they were asked only two questions. Skip logic was used in the survey so that not all respondents were required to answer every question. All survey participants were asked basic demographic information, and all surveys were completed anonymously. The survey link was sent via email by each of the four authors to the preceptors from their own institution, with a second reminder email sent one week from the original date, and a third (final) reminder email sent two weeks from the original date. The survey was open for 24 days. Individuals that served as a preceptor for more than one of the four colleges of pharmacy were asked to only take the survey once. Descriptive statistics and proportions were compared using Mantel–Haenszel chi-square as appropriate. Institutional review board approval was obtained at all four institutions.

Results

The survey was sent to 2523 preceptors with a reply received from 612 individuals for a response rate of 24.3%. Of the 612 respondents, 413 (67%) had a social networking profile on Facebook. Table 1 describes the respondents' demographics in more detail.

Most of the respondents were female with the largest group between the ages of 30–39 years. When asked about the number of years with experience as a preceptor, the largest group consisted of relatively new preceptors with less than five years of experience. Preceptors who have a Facebook profile commonly joined because it was suggested by a friend (55%) or it was for social networking purposes (31%). Only a minority (3%) joined for professional networking. The majority (93%) use Facebook for social networking, 27% use it for professional networking or campaigning, and 6% use it to collaborate with colleagues (respondents could choose more than one option for this question). The majority of respondents view Facebook as being different from professional networking sites such as LinkedIn (www.Linkedin.com, Mountain View CA), stating that Facebook is more of a social tool while they consider LinkedIn only for professional networking. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents who have a Facebook profile spend time on Facebook a few times a week, while only 2% spend more than one hour per day using Facebook. Thirty-four percent of respondents cited having over 200 friends, while only 16% had 50 or fewer friends.

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