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Research

# Going “high stakes” with a pharmacy OSCE: Lessons learned in the transition <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** (1) To describe the experiences of the Auburn University Harrison School of Pharmacy (AUHSOP) in implementing a high-stakes Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) into its curriculum, (2) to examine the extent to which student performance on OSCEs used in the skills laboratory course correlates with performance on the high-stakes Milestone OSCE, and (3) to examine differences in scores between Milestone OSCEs used for formative feedback versus high-stakes consequences.

**Methods:** Two consecutive years of third professional year pharmacy student (P3) scores on the skills laboratory OSCE and the Milestone OSCE were examined. Correlations and *t*-tests were calculated between scores using a matched-pairs design. Pass rates were compared between formative and high-stakes Milestone OSCE scores.

**Results:** Statistically significant although low positive correlations were found between the analytical checklist scores on the two OSCEs. The passing rate on the Milestone increased significantly when the examination became used in a high-stakes manner.

**Conclusions:** Results indicate that, although there is room for improvement, the high-stakes Milestone OSCE is an appropriate assessment for the curriculum, complementing the OSCEs embedded in laboratory courses. A description of lessons learned is offered to assist other schools implementing OSCEs in their programs.

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**Keywords:** OSCE; Assessment; High stakes

## Background

Objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) are growing in popularity within pharmacy education in the

United States.<sup>1</sup> This type of examination is a valuable tool widely used in the health professions for assessing student learning of skills that cannot be tested adequately in written format. OSCEs have been used in the health professions as evaluations carrying high stakes for decades.<sup>2–7</sup>

In 2009, Sturpe<sup>1</sup> examined the use of OSCEs within Doctor of Pharmacy programs in the United States and found that only 37% of responding schools reported use of OSCEs, and about half of the remaining schools were considering the use of OSCEs in the next few years. Of those schools using OSCEs, a majority incorporated them only as a course assessment tool, as opposed to use as a programmatic assessment tool. Although most schools used

<sup>☆</sup>Note: Portions of this project were completed while Sharon McDonough was Director of the Office of Teaching, Learning & Assessment at Auburn University Harrison School of Pharmacy, and Amy Donaldson was Associate Clinical Professor at Auburn University Harrison School of Pharmacy.

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Table 1  
Milestone and skills laboratory OSCE characteristics

	Milestone OSCE	Skills laboratory OSCE
Context	Separate from courses	Embedded in course sequence
Examinees	P2 and P3 students	P1, P2, and P3 students
Stakes	P2 students: none (formative practice) P3 students: high (tied to progression decisions)	40% Of two-hour course grade every semester
Implementation	1997–1998 Academic year 2011–2012 First year of high stakes for P3 students	2006–2007 Academic year

OSCEs as a summative assessment instead of as a formative assessment, only 9% were using OSCEs for high-stakes purposes (defined as affecting progression decisions). Given this information, the Auburn University Harrison School of Pharmacy (AUHSOP), the site of this study, is one of the schools taking the lead in moving toward the use of high-stakes OSCEs in pharmacy education. The AUHSOP uses two types of OSCEs in the curriculum: (1) a stand-alone, high-stakes assessment conducted through the Office of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (OTLA) and not tied to any course and (2) embedded throughout a course sequence. Table 1 displays a summary of differences in the two OSCEs.

#### *A tale of two OSCEs*

##### *The Milestone OSCE*

Since the 1997–1998 academic year, the AUHSOP has administered a yearly OSCE called the Milestone Assessment. From the time of its inception, the Milestone was intended for eventual use in a high-stakes manner tied to progression decisions in the Doctor of Pharmacy program. However, early on in the development of the assessment, the Milestone OSCE results were provided only to administration. Later in its history, feedback was provided to students as well, but the Milestone was used solely as a formative assessment tool up until 2012. Various changes were made to the assessment over a 15-year period including changes to the classes assessed, feedback given,

and case writers. A timeline of these changes appears in Table 2.

In 2006, following a major curriculum revision, a cohort of faculty and staff attended an “OSCE-ology” workshop with the Leslie Dan Faculty of Pharmacy at the University of Toronto in order to learn about performance-based teaching, learning, and assessment and its incorporation into a pharmacy curriculum.<sup>8</sup> The workshop provided faculty with a more rigorous, systematic, and standardized approach to case development than had been previously utilized in the Milestone OSCEs. This newly learned methodology for case writing was implemented in the Milestone OSCEs for the first time in the 2006–2007 academic year.

In 2012, the AUHSOP transitioned the Milestone OSCE to a high-stakes assessment for third professional year (P3) students, requiring them to demonstrate overall minimum competency on the eight-station OSCE in the spring semester. Students must achieve a level of minimum competency on the Milestone OSCEs during the P3 year as a requirement for graduation in the professional program. P3 students who do not achieve minimum competency on the Milestone are required to complete a remediation process and re-test with a subsequent OSCE prior to beginning their P4 clerkships. For remediation, students review the recordings of each of their stations and reflect upon their performance documenting their self-identified strengths and areas for improvement. Clinical faculty members then meet individually with the student to discuss

Table 2  
History of the Milestone 1997–2007

Year	Classes assessed	Use of results	Case writers
1997–1998	P1	Feedback to admin <sup>a</sup>	Selected faculty
1998–1999	P1 and P2	Feedback to admin	Selected faculty
1999–2000	P1, P2, and P3	Feedback to admin	Curriculum and outcomes assessment committee
2000–2001	P1, P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to admin	Curriculum and outcomes assessment committee
2001–2002	P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to admin	Module coordinator and curriculum committee
2002–2003	P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to admin	Module coordinator and curriculum committee
2003–2004	P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to students and admin	Module coordinator and curriculum committee
2004–2005	P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to students and admin	Module coordinator and curriculum committee
2005–2006	P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to students and admin	Module coordinator and curriculum committee
2006–2007	P2, P3, and P4	Feedback to students and admin	OSCE workshop attendees at University of Toronto

<sup>a</sup> Members of the pharmacy school’s administration team, which included the Dean, Associate Deans, and Department Heads.

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