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Research

Development and implementation of pass/fail grading system for advanced pharmacy practice experiences

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Abstract

Objective: This article describes the process of determining the need for a pass/fail grading system for APPE rotations and the development and implementation of a pass/fail grading process.

Methods: Preceptors, faculty, and students were surveyed prior to the development and implementation of pass/fail grading and a new evaluation tool. Preceptors were surveyed after the new grading scheme had been in place for one year about their perceptions of student performance. Rates of APPE commendations under a pass/fail system and the number of students achieving a 4.0 under a point-based system are reported.

Results: Surveys from preceptors indicate that pass/fail grading decreased preceptors concerns about distinguishing between student performances (56.6% had concerns prior to switching versus 30.6% having concerns after switching to pass/fail). Survey results also indicate that pass/fail grading did not affect preceptor's perception of student motivation (61.4% felt concerned under a graded system versus 12.2% were concerned after switching to pass/fail). A pass with honors commendation was given in 17.2% of rotation evaluations, contrasting with 83.1% of students achieving a 4.0 grade in a rotation prior to switching to pass/fail.

Conclusions: The transition to a pass/fail grading system for APPE rotations is not associated with reductions in student motivation or performance, and is acceptable to preceptors. The implementation of a pass/fail system is complicated and takes a significant investment of time, but resulted in an APPE evaluation system which preserves student motivation, fosters robust feedback, decreases grade inflation, and allows preceptors to distinguish and reward student performance.

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Introduction

Experiential learning represents nearly one-third of the Doctor of Pharmacy curriculum as per the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) standards. Since each advanced pharmacy practice experience (APPE) is unique, it is often difficult to consistently assess student

performance in an objective manner. Although assessment tools are used to evaluate student performance, they may not be capturing and quantifying student performance in an objective and consistent manner. Traditional point-based grading scales may lose objectivity between different preceptors over time. A pass/fail system lends itself to the development of a competency-based assessment method.

Increasingly, pharmacy programs are implementing courses whose assessment criteria are based on educational outcomes derived from the Center for the Advancement of

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Pharmacy Education (CAPE) outcomes, tailored to the individual program.^{1,2} Pass/fail grading allows for evaluation of the learner through assessing competency of an outcome rather than earning a grade. A pass/fail system for experiential education has the potential to promote intrinsically self-directed learners motivated through personal growth and development. There is evidence to suggest a significant reduction in perceived stress and potential for improvements in positive attitude associated with pass/fail grading.³ Pass/fail grading appears to have many potential advantages without compromising overall academic achievement.

Literature examining grading schema in health profession programs identifies that using a letter grade system creates anxiety by promoting competition rather than collaborative learning.³ Evidence suggests that there are no appreciable differences in objective measures of academic achievement for students under a pass/fail system as compared to the traditional grade model. Additionally, pass/fail assessment may improve student motivation while performing clinical activities.^{3–7} Interestingly, pass/fail may be particularly useful in advanced training for the health professions, where a shift from competitive learning to active/cooperative learning parallels the shift from the classroom environment to the multidisciplinary medical team model.³ Studies also indicate that a shift to more explicit outcomes-based grading criteria result in a more desirable grade distribution, which can be interpreted as improving grade inflation.⁸

The main objective of this project was to transition to a pass/fail grading scheme for APPEs rather than traditional, point-based grading schemes. The Wilkes University School of Pharmacy faculty assessed the need for, and feasibility of, an objective, competency-based grading criteria (e.g., pass/fail) and evaluation. Based on feedback from various internal and external stakeholders, four themes were considered when determining the appropriate grading scheme: creating a system that preserved student motivation, fostered robust feedback, decreased grade inflation, and allowed preceptors to distinguish individual performance with a mechanism to reward high-achieving students. This article will discuss the rationale, development process, and outcomes of the conversion to a pass/fail, competency-based APPE assessment.

Design

The Wilkes University School of Pharmacy is a private institution with 72 professional students per class. At the core of the program is a philosophy and culture of mentoring, which plays a role in shaping the structure and activities of student assessment. Students are required to complete seven APPE rotations including four required and three elective rotations. Students are exposed to pass/fail grading prior to the APPE year through a sequence of five required introductory pharmacy practice experience (IPPE)

courses. Having a pass/fail grading scheme in the pre-APPE portion of the experiential curriculum allows students to become familiar with the expectation of pass/fail grading prior to the APPE year.

Five years ahead of the implementation of the pass/fail grading system for APPEs, an open discussion was held at a department of pharmacy practice retreat, where some faculty voiced concern about how APPE students were being assessed. A full timeline of the process is described in [Table 1](#). Faculty were concerned about grade inflation when evaluating APPEs on a 4.0 grade scale. A large number of pharmacy students graduate with honors, which is a direct result of the high percentage of 4.0 grades received during the APPE year. There were also concerns about how the current grading scheme did not distinguish high-achieving students from average achieving students and did not gauge progress for underperforming students. The current point-based system and evaluation tool did not account for competence, which at times made it difficult to assess and justify the assessment for underperforming individuals.

Although individuals supported moving to pass/fail, others had concerns about a negative impact on student motivation and how to distinguish and recognize excellent performance. Some were concerned about a potential negative impact on students applying for postgraduate training. Some positive considerations for moving to a pass/fail system were that students may be more likely to focus the acquisition of knowledge and skills rather than on the achievement of a specific grade, that more robust and useful feedback may be provided to students, and that there might be less competition and more cooperation among students. The advantages and disadvantages discussed during retreat were later adapted into a survey to evaluate perceptions of point-based and pass/fail grading schemes.

Based on this discussion, the Chair of the Department of Pharmacy Practice formed an exploratory task force of

Table 1
A timeline of the process to move to a pass/fail grading system

May 2009	Faculty retreat: discussion about how APPE students are being assessed
August 2009	Exploratory task force formed
January 2010	Pre-survey distributed
May 2010	Department retreat: task force shared findings and made a recommendation
June 2010	Implementation task force convened
September 2010	Approved by school
July 2010 to May 2013	Met monthly
August 2010	Students notified
October 2012	Pilot on paper to preceptors
February 2013	Pilot electronically to preceptors
June 2013 to May 2014	Met monthly for APPE Excellence awards
May 2013	Orientation for preceptors
June 2013	Rollout new grading system for the 2013–2014 academic year
August 2014	Post-survey distributed

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