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Opinion

## Pursuing a career in academia: Perceptions of pharmacists and student pharmacists

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### Abstract

To gain an understanding of pharmacists' and student pharmacists' perceptions of careers in academia. Surveys were administered via e-mail to 13,451 licensed pharmacists in the state of North Carolina and to 304 third- and fourth-year professional students at the UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy. Overall, 25% of student pharmacists and 35% of pharmacists indicated that they were considering or had considered a position in academia. In addition, 67% of all respondents indicated being informed about pharmacy career opportunities by previous faculty members. Meaningful work, interfacing with students, and flexible hours were cited as being most important in considering academia, while politics, geographical location, and pay were cited as barriers. Perceptions of the academic environment may present a challenge to increasing interest in careers in pharmacy academia. Study results indicate that efforts, in addition to exposing students to careers in academia, are necessary to address barriers that impact perceptions of academia.

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### Introduction

One of the most critical challenges facing schools of pharmacy today is faculty recruitment and retention.<sup>1</sup> Qualified faculty are essential in securing the future of pharmacy education. In recognizing this concern, the Chairs of the Council of Faculties and the Council of Deans within the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) formed a Task Force on Faculty Workforce in 2005 to review the status of the pharmacy faculty and to identify aspects that may influence the supply of and demand for faculty.<sup>2</sup> This group had ominous projections for pharmacy faculty shortages throughout the United States.

Furthermore, AACP's 2010–2011 survey of “Vacant Budgeted and Lost Faculty Positions” revealed a total of 378 vacant and/or lost positions among 101 responding schools. While most vacancies were due to retirements (21.3%), 14% were due to faculty members moving to practice positions in the health care private sector.<sup>3</sup> Factors compounding the challenge of faculty recruitment and retention include (1) an increase in the number of schools and colleges of pharmacy,<sup>1</sup> (2) limited positive exposure to pharmacy academia,<sup>4</sup> and (3) lack of effective strategies to address this issue.<sup>5</sup>

The 2005 Task Force provided several recommendations for the recruitment of pharmacy faculty, one being to determine the level of excitement and the perceived barriers to academic careers among professional students, graduate students, fellows, and residents.<sup>2</sup> In response to this recommendation, several studies have been conducted to understand the perspectives of pharmacy students, faculty, residents, and practitioners with regard to a career in higher

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education. One study was designed to gain an understanding of pharmacists' and student pharmacists' perceptions of careers in academia. The study was conducted by Sheaffer et al. and surveyed fourth-year pharmacy students, residents, new faculty members, and clinical pharmacy practitioners. This research revealed motivators to pursuing an academic career as the ability to shape the future of pharmacy, personal flexibility of faculty positions, and autonomy of faculty positions. The potential need to generate part of the salary through research or clinical practice was found to be a weak deterrent for the cohort.<sup>6</sup> Other studies have established that factors such as limited patient contact, salary, grant writing, and public speaking requirements are deterrents for student pharmacists considering careers in academia. The opportunities to teach students, as well as a favorable work-life balance, have been identified as additional positive factors relating to a career in pharmacy education.<sup>4–6</sup>

Although these studies provide valuable insight, there is little information concerning perceptions of academia among a broader population of pharmacists. This information may prove valuable in developing strategies to recruit and retain future faculty to meet the expanding need for pharmacists to pursue careers in academia. To gain a better understanding of both pharmacists' and student pharmacists' perceptions of academic careers in pharmacy, a survey was administered to licensed pharmacists in the state of North Carolina and Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) students at the UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy.

## Methods

### *Survey population*

The study population included all pharmacists licensed to practice pharmacy by the North Carolina Board of Pharmacy ( $n = 13,451$ ) and students enrolled in the third or fourth year of the PharmD program at the School ( $n = 304$ ).

### *Survey design*

Surveys were developed using Qualtrics (Provo, UT), an online survey tool with data analysis functionality. A 14-question survey was administered to pharmacists, and a 20-question survey was administered to students. The student survey contained additional and more in-depth questions pertaining to current sources of exposure, professional development, and future plans that may impact career decisions. The student survey also contained opportunities to submit open-ended responses for each question. This additional information was necessary to assess if current students were receiving opportunities to access information related to careers in pharmacy education.

Survey questions were developed based on feedback gathered from multiple focus groups involving students and

alumni, which were conducted during a two-year period. Consistently, positive characteristics identified included preparation of future pharmacists, collaborative opportunities, meaningful work, and intellectual satisfaction and autonomy. Negative attributes were lower pay, stress, politics, and difficult students. These questions were then evaluated at the institute for research in social science, in the department for survey research and development, and in an effort to reduce potential biases and enhance survey navigation. All survey responses were anonymous, and the University's Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol for exemption. Chi-square analyses were performed to determine any significant differences in survey question responses between pharmacists and students with a significance level set at  $p = 0.05$ . Free-text entries were coded to identify frequent responses.

### *Pharmacist survey*

A 14-question, multiple-choice survey was disseminated to licensed pharmacists via e-mail by the state board of pharmacy. Survey questions assessed demographic information including gender, age, race, level of education, and current practice type. In addition, the survey gauged whether the pharmacist had previously considered a career in academia, sources of career information while in pharmacy school, and appealing aspects and barriers to choosing a career in academia. The survey also gathered general comments regarding a career in pharmacy education. For select questions, respondents had the option to select multiple answers and provide a free-form response. Free-form responses were included to gain more insight on the decision to choose a career in higher education or an alternate career path. Pharmacist participants were given one month to complete the survey. No reminders for survey completion were supplied.

### *Student pharmacist survey*

To assess student perceptions of a career in academia, a 20-question, multiple-choice survey was administered and disseminated to all current PharmD students at the School of Pharmacy through Qualtrics. However, due to a low number of student respondents, a second survey composed of both multiple-choice and short-answer questions was generated and distributed to only third- and fourth-year professional students in the PharmD Program, who would be nearer to graduation and involved in decisions related to post-graduate opportunities and career planning. Similar to the survey disseminated to pharmacists, the student survey assessed demographic information, faculty positions that may have been considered, sources of pharmacy career information, and work and/or extramural experience. Students were also asked about plans to complete a pharmacy residency, fellowship, or other post-graduate training opportunity, factors that seem appealing about a career in academia, perceived barriers to pursuing a career in

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