



Short Communication

An individualized approach to student progression at a school of pharmacy

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Abstract

Objective: To describe the individualized student progression process at a school of pharmacy (SOP) and to provide outcomes after nine semesters.

Materials and methods: The Student Progress Committee (SPC) gathers information related to students placed on academic probation including interviews with students. The committee reports their findings and recommendations to the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. Students' reasons for placement on probation were reviewed for themes. Of the students in the bottom quartile for admissions variables, those placed on academic probation were compared with those never placed on academic probation.

Results: The SOP matriculated five classes from fall 2010 to fall 2014 for a total of 430 students and 1966 student-semesters. A total of 68 students (15.9%) came before the SPC for a total of 90 student-semesters (4.6%) on academic probation. Of those students, 13 (19.1%) met with the committee twice and four (5.9%) came before the committee three times. More than 10% of students provided these reasons for course failure: lack of self-advocacy, complications with course expectations/delivery, studying process issues, difficulty in relationships outside school, excessive work/outside obligations, and challenges with exam taking. Nearly one in four students in the bottom performing quartile for admission variables across all cohorts spent time on academic probation.

Conclusion: While students on probation may be less academically inclined at admission, many students cite non-academic reasons for course failure. This supports an individualized approach for students on academic probation. This approach helps the school offer the student an opportunity for success and holds the student accountable for their performance.

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Introduction

The process by which schools of pharmacy address student academic progression serves a critical role by determining if, and how, students will continue their studies

toward their Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm.D.) degree when their academic performance dictates a deviation from the standard curriculum schedule. The 2016 Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standard 17 addresses progression, and clearly articulates the importance of student progression policies as well as the necessity for early detection and intervention to achieve successful resolution of issues.¹ This critical expectation requires a sound, clearly written, and fundamentally fair process for student progression. At Concordia University Wisconsin

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School of Pharmacy (CUWSOP), the Student Progress Committee (SPC) adheres to a consistent process for handling each case and develops an individualized plan for each student placed on academic probation. This review aims to analyze the individualized approach and its merits in supporting academically underperforming students, and to prompt further discussion and research on the topic in the pharmacy education community.

Limited literature exists regarding student progression in pharmacy education, especially surrounding how individual student progression plans are developed.² Numerous databases, including the Educational Research Information Center (ERIC), EBSCOhost's Education Research Complete, PubMed, and ScienceDirect, were searched in an effort to identify previous work. Various mixtures of the following terms were attempted in the search: pharmacy students, academic achievement, retention, health professions, probation, remediation, and/or student progression. The majority of results referred to undergraduate student achievement and retention^{3,4} or non-pharmacy health professions such as nursing and physical therapy. A systematic review of literature from 1984 to April 2012 regarding remediation among medical students concluded to have "identified new research questions" with an aim to "stimulate debate among those involved in identifying and addressing underperformance."⁵ The need for this debate can be similarly applied to remediation and progression within pharmacy education.

Many schools offer remediation of coursework, with repetition of the course being most common. Some institutions allow for shorter remediation via monitored independent study and summer boot camps. Additionally, some schools offer students the opportunity to partake in a reduced course load curriculum, adding time to degree completion. Lastly, suspension or dismissal from the program comes into play for students on academic probation who cannot correct the deficiency in the time provided by the school.⁶

Student Progress Committee

The SPC is a committee chartered in the by-laws of the CUWSOP. The SPC establishes the standards for student progression and monitors and evaluates student progression processes. It is composed of three faculty members appointed from each of the two departments and one staff member (ex-officio), the Director of Student Affairs. Faculty members from the Pharmacy Practice Department all have Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm.D.) degrees whereas the faculty members from the Pharmaceutical and Administrative Sciences Department have Pharm.D., Ph.D., MD, and/or MBA degrees. Faculty ranks vary among assistant, associate, or full professors. The faculty members each serve a three-year term with staggered terms to maintain continuity. The faculty of the SOP voted to approve the student progression policy and vote on any modifications.

The SPC's standing charges are as follows: (1) conduct meetings with students placed on academic probation and make recommendations regarding student progression to the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs; (2) monitor progression policies and procedures to ensure optimal student and school outcomes; (3) engage in regular communication with the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs to ensure the Committee is effectively fulfilling its role within the CUWSOP; and (4) communicate with the Admissions Committee and Assessment Committee to identify factors related to student progression that the respective committees may find valuable.

The SPC at CUWSOP meets students who do not meet the criteria to progress through the curriculum and makes recommendations for progression to the program's academic officer. The purpose of the committee is to ask the student, "Why?" Students entering and operating within pharmacy curriculum have demonstrated at least some academic success based on their pre-pharmacy grade point average (GPA) and Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT) scores which warranted admission to the program. Why do they struggle in pharmacy school? The committee is tasked with discovering the root cause of the poor performance.

With many potential progression pathways, the answer to the why question becomes imperative. It is important to understand the root of the progression problem on an individual basis in order to determine the next best course of action. The purpose of this article is to stimulate further academy discussion and consideration of student progression policies and processes by describing the individualized student progression process at Concordia University Wisconsin School of Pharmacy and sharing outcomes after nine semesters of experience.

Methods

Student progress procedure

A student is placed on academic probation when they earn an F grade in any course or when they accumulate more than one course grade below a C-. Each course coordinator sets the criteria the students must meet to pass their course. This criterion is stated in each course syllabus which is reviewed and approved by the curriculum committee and the plenary faculty. The student progress procedure is described briefly in [Figure 1](#) and begins with identifying students who meet the criteria for academic probation. These students are notified of their placement on academic probation by phone or in person by the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs (further referred to as the Associate Dean in this article), or their designee. Each student is invited to their own scheduled meeting with the SPC for an opportunity to explain and clarify placement on academic probation. Meanwhile, the course coordinator is asked to provide the SPC with a report outlining the student's

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