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## Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning

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Experiences in Teaching and Learning

## Design and evaluation of a two-phase learner-centered new student orientation program

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and purpose:** To identify student perceptions associated with a learner-centered, multi-stage, flipped, new student orientation for a doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) program.

**Educational activity and setting:** First-year PharmD students over three years (2012–2014) were engaged in a two-phase learner-centered orientation process designed to allow students to customize the transition experience. After orientation, students completed a survey to assess programming and their perceptions of readiness to begin the PharmD program. Utilizing student feedback, the orientation program evolved each year to better meet the needs of incoming students.

**Findings:** In 2014, 78.9% of students felt confident in their ability to transition to the PharmD program after orientation, an increase from 55.7% in 2012 when the changes in orientation were first implemented. Additionally, student perceptions of readiness to transition to the PharmD program improved each year.

**Discussion and summary:** Implementation of a learner-centered, flipped, new student orientation may improve students' perceptions of readiness for study and decrease anxiety of transitioning to a PharmD program. Additionally, it may be an effective tool for increasing orientation program efficiency, while improving student engagement.

## Background and purpose

New student orientation programs provide a unique opportunity for incoming doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) students to identify program expectations and cultural norms while simultaneously establishing personal goals and identifying opportunities to enrich their personal and professional development. Given the impact such orientation and transition experiences can have, it is imperative that new student orientation programs be purposefully developed around the collective experiences of new students and focus on learner-specific transition needs. These learner-centered foundational transition experiences can set the stage for a dynamic curricular experience as well, laying the groundwork for self-directed, meaningful learning.

Orientation programming is critical for establishing necessary student expectations, knowledge, and behaviors to be successful in a new academic program. Thus, traditional orientation practices that are predominantly unidirectional information sharing can unintentionally promote passive, unengaged learners.<sup>1</sup> For example, previous new student orientation programs at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill Eshelman School of Pharmacy consisted of multi-day unidirectional delivery of information (e.g., policies and procedures, class schedules, course instructor introductions, curricular expectations, co-curricular involvement

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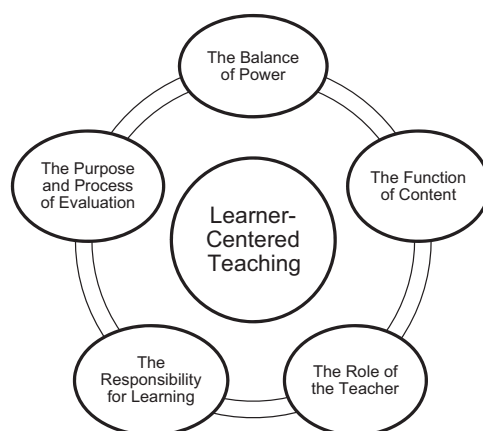


Fig. 1. Learner-centered teaching: five key changes to practice.<sup>3</sup>

opportunities), rather than engaging students in a conversation regarding various opportunities at the school. This approach traditionally involved one or two administrators and/or course instructors delivering information to the students (i.e., lecturing). As expected, students often reported on electronic post-orientation surveys feelings of disengagement and overwhelmingness by the volume of information provided during orientation.

Simultaneous to recognizing the opportunity for orientation program improvement, the UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy prepared for a curricular transformation that evolved from a traditional knowledge-centered approach to an innovative learner-centered approach.<sup>2</sup> Given the school's concurrent curricular transformation, a need was identified to develop an efficient and effective orientation program to adequately prepare students for the PharmD program. Research has shown that learner-centered teaching results in increased student motivation, confidence, and enthusiasm, all the while training the learner to function responsibly and maturely through increased levels of ownership of their knowledge and experience.<sup>3</sup> While there is ample documentation supporting the implementation and effectiveness of learner-centered teaching, a gap exists in the literature regarding how to best translate these strategies and assessments into learner-centered orientation and transition experiences.<sup>4-6</sup> The school aimed to infuse learner-centered approaches into the orientation process for PharmD students with hopes to ultimately foster an environment and set of experiences that cultivate independent, confident, engaged, and active student participants who are prepared to transition into a learner-centered PharmD program.

Weimer's<sup>3</sup> *Five Key Changes to Practice* guided the transformation of the new student orientation program. This work highlights the need for: (1) a balance of power to exist between the teacher and learner, (2) the function of content to develop a knowledge base and learning skills, (3) the role of the teacher to guide and facilitate learning, (4) the responsibility for learning to be shared between learner and teacher, and (5) the purpose and process of evaluation to promote a learner's opportunity to develop self-assessment skills (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> Embracing these tenants, new student orientation presented a unique opportunity to enhance learners' confidence and excitement while providing students with more freedom, and therefore more responsibility, to take ownership (i.e. power) of their transition process. Furthermore, these benchmarks reinforced the notion that all orientation activities should be purposeful and directly contribute to learning-centered outcomes and objectives and provide evaluation activities that are used in ways to enhance students' inherent potential and self-awareness of their transition needs. The primary aim of our work was to provide a learner-centered, multi-staged, flipped, new student orientation experience, rather than a passive, unidirectional, information sharing event, and to assess students' perceptions of the experience and their readiness to transition to the PharmD program.

### Educational activity and setting

Building on the work of Weimer<sup>3</sup>, the school committed to designing an enhanced transition and orientation experience beginning in 2012. The UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy is a four-year PharmD program at a public university. The majority of students (~85%) enter the program with a four-year degree and are mostly (~60%) in-state residents. Distinct efforts were made to foster independent, engaged student learners who were prepared for the full scope and rigor of the four-year PharmD program, as opposed to dependent, unengaged student learners. Through a deductive process utilizing accepted premises and best practices related to transition and student development, the school was able to identify and design a new model that posited learner-centered approaches as a key to success. Assuming that dynamic teaching is most likely accomplished through learner-centered approaches that empower and involve students; and assuming the learning and acculturation process for new students begins long before students arrive for the first day of class; then impactful orienting experiences should embrace learner-centered ideologies and meet students where they live or exist.<sup>3,7-9</sup>

Realizing that a learner-centered orientation and transition experience could assist with establishing student expectations, norms, and behaviors necessary for the learner-centered curricular and co-curricular experiences, the school committed to evolve its programming from a mostly unidirectional, teacher-centered process to one that allowed students to own and direct the pace and content of their learning. In addition, previous student assessments indicated room for programmatic improvement in a variety of key best

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