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Commentary

How a more detailed understanding of culture is needed before successful educational change can be made

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The profession of pharmacy is being afforded many important opportunities, and continues to face many challenges. To successfully address these issues schools and colleges of pharmacy must have a complete understanding of their current context, which includes culture. However, little of the work on culture in pharmacy education specifically defines what these cultures are, and equally importantly how this understanding of culture can be used to make changes, improve student learning, and ultimately develop pharmacists better prepared to improve patient outcomes.

Perspective: Organizational culture has been defined in a multitude of ways in the literature. Martin's three-perspectives approach, which combines integrated, differentiated, and fragmented understandings, offers one way to approach defining culture and leveraging that definition of change. Furthermore, the organizational culture profile (OCP), is one tool that can be used to identify and differentiate between Martin's three perspectives.

Implications: Culture plays an important role in academic pharmacy, but before it can reach its highest potential in improving student outcomes, and faculty experience, it must be completely understood. Martin's approach and the OCP offer one way to achieve this objective.

Introduction

As with all other health professions, pharmacy is constantly evolving to improve patient care. Provider status is gaining momentum and will hopefully become a reality for all pharmacists in the United States (US) soon.¹ Community pharmacists across the country are creating networks of high performing pharmacies to improve patient care, and demonstrate the value of pharmacy services on a large scale.² Hospital pharmacists' roles are expanding as new practice models are created to include new clinical privileges, the further development of specialty pharmacy services, and continue to prevent harmful medication errors.³

There are also important challenges facing the profession. One recent study projected that the US may face an oversupply of pharmacists by the year 2030.⁴ While the degree of this possible oversupply is a matter of debate,^{5,6} dispensing fees are dwindling and becoming more difficult for community pharmacies to manage and understand, which may also result in changes to pharmacy staffing.⁷ Furthermore, traditional roles associated with the pharmacist, such as prescription checking and dispensing, are being handed over to pharmacy technicians in many states.⁸

An important component of ensuring the success of these changes is making sure pharmacy students obtain the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in this fluid environment. Organizations such as the Joint Commission of Pharmacy Practitioners

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and the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, the Center for Advancement of Pharmacy Education, the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, and state boards of pharmacy establish standards for pharmacy practice and student education to aide in this process.⁹⁻¹² However, once these have been established schools and colleges of pharmacy are responsible for deciding how to operationalize these standards.

As evidence-based medicine has dictated the proper way to care for patients, so too has evidence-based teaching entered into how academics think about educating students in health professions.^{13,14} However, just as the successful implementation of evidence-based medicine requires a careful examination of the context into which the change is being made, so too does the successful implementation of evidence-based education.¹⁵ To understand context a number of factors must be considered, and these include the social, economic, political, legal, physical, and cultural environment.¹⁵

Culture is regularly mentioned within pharmacy education literature; however, it is not often connected to particular educational outcomes.¹⁶⁻²⁰ For example, some authors have stated, "Starting on the first day...we must instill the principles of professionalism as an essential step in developing our culture of academic integrity,"¹⁹ while others have asked questions such as, "...[H]ow can we incorporate safety issues in our curricula...to make meaningful contributions to a culture of safety?..."¹⁸ However, few have provided specific details describing the cultures to which they refer. Specifically, what does a culture of safety look like? How do our students currently measure up to that ideal? Without clear, objective details, it becomes very difficult for schools of pharmacy to have a complete understanding of their context, and whether new cultures can be adopted or the current culture changed.²¹

In the following commentary, we advocate for more formal evaluation and definition of the cultures within schools of pharmacy to 1) establish a baseline understanding of current cultures, 2) use that baseline to better understand any differences between current cultures and visions for the future, and 3) to apply scarce resources effectively to improve culture, the program, and ultimately student learning.

Perspective

Defining culture

Defining culture clearly and objectively to understand context is challenging as there are so many approaches that can be used. For example, the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition defines culture as, "shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization."²² However, the Center also offers nine other definitions that have been used in other areas.²² While the fundamentals of these definitions do overlap, those applied in the study of organizational culture will be used in this article because they have been applied to the study of other health professionals.^{23,24}

The first definition of organization culture comes from the competing values framework (CVF), which suggests that organizations are comprised of sets of competing values (centralization vs. decentralization, and internal vs. external environmental foci) that organizations must balance to be successful.²⁵ The second definition comes from Edgar Schein,²⁶ who describes organizational culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that [were] learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that [have] worked well enough to be considered valid..."²⁶ The third definition comes from Joanne Martin,²⁷ who building on the work of Schein, defines organizational culture as "patterns of [subjective] interpretation composed of meanings associated with various cultural manifestations, such as stories, rituals, formal and informal practices, jargon, and physical arrangements"²⁷

Furthermore, each of these definitions approaches the measurement of culture differently. The CVF identifies four archetypal cultures (team, hierarchical, entrepreneurial, and rational), which are based on the interactions of each of the competing values outlined and can be measured using survey instruments.²⁵ Schein²⁶ proposes that organizational culture is comprised of three levels; artifacts (i.e., items), espoused values (i.e., mission statements), and basic underlying assumptions (i.e., ideas that are taken for granted) that should be measured through in-depth interviews and observations. Martin²⁷ advocates for the three-perspective approach, which contains the integrative (i.e., shared espoused values), differentiated (i.e., sub-group differences), and fragmented (i.e., ambiguous values that may be time dependent) perspectives, each of which can be measured using in-depth interviews, observations, and survey instruments.

Deciding which definition fits your setting

While the definitions of culture share several similarities, each of these approaches offers distinct advantages and disadvantages that must be considered in employing one of them in your school of pharmacy. Some recent work suggests that the CVF instrument can be used to comprehensively characterize organizational cultures, but further empirical support is needed.²⁸ As previously described, Schein's approach advocates for extensive observations and numerous in-depth interviews, which would offer a degree of detail that survey instruments would not be able to obtain. However, this approach is very labor intensive and it is uncertain whether or not Schein's approach to organizational culture can be used to affect change without this in-depth and extensive work.²⁶ Martin's²⁷ three-perspectives approach offers ways to understand how the current culture is shared, how it differs amongst particular sub-groups, and reinforces the notion that any characterization is likely to produce ambiguous results that are time dependent and must therefore be continually reevaluated. Furthermore, the three-perspectives approach can be measured using multiple methods depending on the needs of researchers.

The CVF provides, a typological perspective meaning, in this case, that a culture could be identified as being one pre-determined

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