

MEDICAL COLLEGE OF WISCONSIN SCHOOL OF PHARMACY STUDENT WRITING CLUB:

## How the Coronavirus Pandemic Altered Learning Experiences: Perspectives from MCW-Pharmacy Students

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The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the whole world, impacting every institutional learning experience. Pharmacy students, in particular, have been doing much of their education this year via virtual learning. The Medical College of Wisconsin-School of Pharmacy (MCW-SOP) has faced these challenges head on. During a more typical year, MCW-SOP students enjoyed a robust curriculum and many interpersonal collaborations. It was through these interactions that students cultivated relationships, created their own learning style, and grew as pharmacists of the future. It was also key for MCW-SOP faculty to accommodate diverse learning styles.

The transition from in-person to virtual learning has been difficult for many MCW-SOP students, and their ability to adapt has been crucial.

### Adjusting to Virtual Learning

Entering any graduate program requires a new level of discipline and rigor. Different classes of students at MCW-SOP had different experiences with virtual learning. For example, the class of 2023 (didactic coursework) began in-person instruction in July 2020, while strictly observing social distancing and other safety protocols. As the pandemic worsened in the fall, this class transitioned to a hybrid model, with virtual lectures; only certain skills labs were completed in person.

In contrast, the class of 2022 has been using a virtual model for most of the pandemic, from March 2020 through spring 2021 (except for certain skills labs requirements).

Many students found the conversion to virtual learning to be very difficult. Their biggest challenge was the lack of

in-person contact and collaboration with other pharmacy students, professionals, and professors. Students expressed feeling less motivated as virtual learning continued. However, while virtual learning led to significant challenges, it also provided an opportunity for self-assessment and new routines. In-person lectures offer structure, while the virtual environment required better time-management skills and more individual motivation. The discipline required for virtual learning will likely benefit MCW-SOP students in the future.

### Impact on Rotations

When students began their first APPEs during the pandemic, they had physically been away from any type of on-site learning for over three months. The change was abrupt, leaving a lot of the students feeling under-prepared. APPEs are touted as one of the most important experiences of the pharmacy curriculum, and many students felt anxious about meeting high expectations.

Generally, the responsibilities of students on rotations were restricted due to COVID-19. Sites did not want to increase the risk of their students contracting or spreading the virus, a sentiment echoed by MCW-SOP. Many pharmacists were in a similar predicament, where face-to-face patient interactions were either stopped or substantially decreased. This was true for most inpatient and ambulatory settings. Retail and community settings, on the other hand, still required in-person interactions with patients, now including face masks, Plexi-glass barriers, and six-foot social distancing requirements. Even though students were on-site for rotations, a lot of their learning and tasks were virtual (i.e., telehealth). Student conferences and presentations were completed via virtual

meeting platforms. Patient interactions, if applicable, were also often done via phone or virtually. For students who did see patients in person, face shields and/or goggles were an addition to the personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements.

Unsurprisingly, much of the year's education was geared toward keeping up with new developments in COVID-19 treatment. Of particular interest to pharmacy, medications and vaccines were common discussion topics among preceptors and students. Pharmacy students were expected to be knowledgeable about treatments, including the use of existing medications such as dexamethasone or baricitinib; new vaccines manufactured by Pfizer or Moderna; or new drugs such as bamlanivimab or casirivimab-imdevimab. Many students found this rewarding, as they became trusted sources of information, both during rotation and at home with their friends and family.

For Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experience (IPPE) rotations during the pandemic, there was uncertainty. MCW's clinical partnerships have been a driving force for the progression of clinically trained pharmacists. Unfortunately, during the early response to the pandemic, many clinical sites limited or temporarily halted on-site rotations for the safety of workers and patients. Many of these scheduled hospital rotations throughout Wisconsin were converted to virtual rotations.

Many students expressed feelings of being put at a potential disadvantage, without the opportunity to participate in a hospital rotation, and missing out on the ability to gain clinical experience and networking opportunities. On the other hand, students who remained in in-person rotations during the initial phase of the pandemic expressed fear of contracting the

virus. Many students were initially hesitant to attend their scheduled rotations due to the uncertainty about virus containment. Those who expressed initial feelings of apprehension while attending their rotations have felt more comfortable as safety protocols have proved effective over time.

Although the initial hesitancy of many students to participate in rotations came from a fear of putting themselves or their families in a compromised health position, the pandemic provided new opportunities for the pharmacy profession as a whole. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of having high-quality interprofessional healthcare providers, including pharmacists, on the patient care team. This pandemic has created unique educational experiences for student pharmacists to learn, grow, and become better healthcare providers.

## Maintaining Mental Health and Self-Care

Like most people of their generation, student pharmacists are typically active on social media, where they observed their peers' perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many student pharmacists were outraged to see that, as COVID-19 cases increased, concern from the public decreased. Especially as students on clinical rotations see firsthand the effects of COVID-19, it is jarring to watch friends, family, or peers dismiss COVID-19 safety measures or even the virus itself. This, along with the upheaval of normal routines and having to worry about residency or job applications, has added a lot of pressure to an already stressful time for pharmacy students. There has been a recent societal push for mental health care—this is even more relevant during an ongoing pandemic. People are often sharing advice online on how to cope. A common recommendation among the third-year pharmacy students is the importance of maintaining relationships. Since it has mostly been irresponsible to meet face-to-face, people found alternative avenues to satisfy their need for social interactions. This manifested in many ways: calling or texting loved ones daily; periodic meetups with friends through virtual platforms such as Discord or Skype; or sending care packages full of snacks.

Being able to maintain daily routines, maintain self-care daily regimens, and spend

time with friends and family are all things pharmacy students have become accustomed to this year. Many students expressed a decline in their mental health as the pandemic progressed, and as their normal routines—preparing for class, commuting to campus, and so on—were upended. Where it previously took an hour and a half to prepare for a lecture, it now takes less than 30 minutes. Students have expressed that their daily self-care routines have been sacrificed, and replaced by increased hours of sleep.

Furthermore, group study sessions have been harder to initiate virtually. Many students have expressed the difficulty of not seeing classmates in person. Before the pandemic, incorporating and maintaining a schedule was heavily recommended for students to help balance school and other parts of life. It is becoming increasingly evident that, as virtual sessions continue, students should try to incorporate schedules to maintain and preserve their own mental health.

An important note: There are many non-COVID-19 factors that play a role in first-year pharmacy students' mental health. Starting a graduate program at a new level of difficulty comes with its own set of challenges. Prior to the pandemic, the primary method for maintaining self-care as a first-year pharmacy student in an accelerated pharmacy program seemed to be activity. Even something like going for a brief walk was enough of a break to recharge. If not physical activity, then taking the time to read a book, watch an episode of a show, or do something non-school related was valuable. For students, there tends to be a constant sense of always having the next thing to do on a never-ending to-do list. This can negatively impact mental health, as it does not allow for the time to reflect on and take pride in what has already been accomplished. This challenge has been amplified by COVID-19.

## Conclusion

Despite the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has also created new opportunities of growth for student pharmacists and the pharmacy profession. More than ever, healthcare is in need of vaccine champions, and pharmacists are in the ideal position to make the most change in this area. The access patients

have to pharmacists will hopefully keep COVID-19 vaccination numbers up during widespread vaccination. In addition, many of the COVID-19 vaccine clinics have been and will be run by pharmacy students and pharmacists. Fortunately, pharmacists are not only trained to vaccinate, but are also experienced in having important conversations about the importance of getting vaccinated, and addressing patient concerns. MCW-SOP students will continue to play an important role as the pandemic progresses. Skills honed during the pandemic, such as mindfulness and resilience, will be critical for students as they continue to pursue their pharmacy careers.

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