

Leadership Spotlight: Melissa Theesfeld

by Hailey Thompson, 2022 PharmD Candidate, and Nicholas Olszewski, 2022 PharmD Candidate



Dr. Melissa Theesfeld is no stranger to forging her own path throughout her pharmacy experiences.

As a student, she took a non-traditional path, pursuing a career as a study coordinator for two years at a contract research organization, prior to developing an interest in pharmacy. Following that spark, Theesfeld enrolled at the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Pharmacy. Upon graduation, she completed her PGY-1 at Froedtert Hospital in Milwaukee, where she later became the program's first PGY-2 administrative resident. After practicing in a management role at Froedtert Hospital for a few years, Theesfeld decided to follow her passion for project management and to explore new opportunities. She continues to pursue roles that allow her to help others engage with their pharmacy pathways.

As current president of the Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin (PSW), Theesfeld sits on the board of directors and has played a crucial role in steering the organization through the uncertainty of a pandemic and a transition to new executive leadership. As PSW president, Theesfeld has prioritized the PSW membership to bolster the level of member engagement and provide opportunities for members to connect with one another. It is important to Theesfeld that pharmacists and pharmacy technicians see the value in their membership and use their experiences to shape the organization and the future of Wisconsin pharmacy practice.

Aside from her PSW presidency, Theesfeld has served in her current role as director of experiential education for Concordia University Wisconsin's (CUW) School of Pharmacy since 2011, having been a member of the experiential education team since the founding of the school in 2010. In this role, Theesfeld coordinates all IPPE and APPE rotations completed by the student pharmacists

at CUW. She also connects with her students in the classroom as she coordinates pharmacy experience courses and guest-lectures in others. Her mission is to ensure that her students have access to quality experiences and can select where to complete their experiences. Having a varied offering of experiences for student pharmacists to choose from is important to Theesfeld. Combining this flexibility with different touchpoints throughout the curriculum provides extra guidance for students.

Opportunity Follows Challenge

Theesfeld's favorite aspect of her role as director of experiential education is her part in the creation of CUW's School of Pharmacy and determining how to structure and build the program into the success that it is now. Throughout this process, Theesfeld faced challenges that she had not had to ponder previously. For 127 years, until 2010, UW-Madison was the only pharmacy school in Wisconsin; nobody in the state had had to consider how to structure a new program for developing pharmacists. One of the largest hurdles that Theesfeld had to overcome was convincing multiple major health systems and their external partners of the benefits that CUW could bring to the profession. Showing these stakeholders how the school trains their pharmacy students, and highlighting their qualifications as future pharmacists, was a crucial step to establishing these partnerships. External stakeholders are essential in providing valuable experiential education to students.

Another difficulty in the creation of the experiential education program at CUW was proving to stakeholders that there are multiple ways to train pharmacists to become quality practitioners. Theesfeld continues to enrich stakeholder relationships in this role. She looks for

ways to advise preceptors on how to avoid feeling burdened by optimizing the use of their student pharmacists. It is evident that pharmacies and other pharmacy sites are busy, so introducing the task of teaching a student has the potential to hinder a pharmacist's ability to complete responsibilities. To combat the burden of student presence, Theesfeld is continuously brainstorming and implementing ideas for how preceptors can direct their students' time and learning in ways that enhance engagement while also focusing efforts on the pharmacy's goals and responsibilities.

Advocacy for a Bright Future in Pharmacy

Pulling from her experience engaging stakeholders to establish a new pharmacy school, Theesfeld stresses the importance of securing external support and the broader impact it can have on the pharmacy profession. The future of pharmacy is in the hands of those willing to be champions for our profession, our abilities, and the crucial roles that we play in the provision of patient care. In recent years, Wisconsin pharmacists have enjoyed various expansions in the ability to offer care services due to the efforts of individuals who see the profession's value as well as the larger role that we can play in the prevention and treatment of diseases in our community.

One of the main challenges facing Wisconsin pharmacists is a lack of sustainable reimbursement for unique, pharmacist-provided patient care services. Wisconsin employs highly innovative pharmacists; however, patient access to their services and the expansion of these services are less robust than they could be. To continue these services effectively, pharmacists and pharmacy students must be prepared to advocate for our profession and articulate our essential roles to legislators, other healthcare team

members, and the public. Together we can demonstrate the abundance of care services pharmacists can provide in addition to the traditional dispensing role, and obtain the necessary external support needed to catalyze patient access.

Advocacy is a topic that Theesfeld is passionate about and has created ample opportunities for her students to be exposed to both in and out of the classroom. Throughout their time at CUW, pharmacy students participate in classes and simulations that address servant leadership and advocacy. Various student organizations also emphasize leadership and advocacy. Engagement of pharmacists, pharmacy students, and pharmacy technicians is crucial in the progression of the field of pharmacy. Advocating for our abilities, following our passions, and taking advantage of every opportunity facilitates the completion of our goals.

Advice for Future Leaders

Theesfeld's passion for developing well-versed pharmacists does not end with

introducing advocacy; she also cares about other aspects of professional development. Theesfeld shared some words of wisdom that she received in her residency that helped shape her into the great leader that she is: "Why aren't you speaking up when you have an opinion?" This simple query inspired Theesfeld to reflect on her actions and fears, to challenge herself to make a constructive change. She now encourages her students and mentees that we, as leaders and pharmacy professionals, cannot be afraid of getting shut down for sharing our opinions. If we never share our thoughts, no one will know what we have to contribute, and further, nobody will benefit from the success that could come from a great idea that was hidden out of fear.

Additionally, Theesfeld encourages future leaders to take advantage of opportunities presented to them. As a part of a complex and varied profession, opportunities are always presenting themselves, and the future is unknown and full of possibility. Taking advantage

of these opportunities connects people, facilitates learning moments, and provides moments to advocate for our profession and our patients. To grow as professionals, we must be open and willing to tackle new challenges. Theesfeld strongly believes that to become inspiring leaders, pharmacists must experience a wide array of opportunities, overcome their fears of rejection, and share their thoughts and ideas to experience personal and professional growth.

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