

Drug Topics

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Pharmacy schools: To build or not to build?

Taking the plunge in uncertain times

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Between 1955 and 1975, not one new pharmacy school opened its doors. From 1975 to 2005, the growth of new schools slowly increased. Particularly since 2000, the growth of new schools has accelerated dramatically. Within the past three years, plans to open nearly two dozen new pharmacy schools across the United States have been announced. By the fall of 2010, 110 pharmacy schools are set to be open across the nation, a gain of 18 new schools in five years.

The building boom has caused some pharmacists to ask whether there is really a need for all these new schools. In a recent online poll, Drug Topics asked readers whether they believe additional pharmacy schools are necessary. With 766 votes cast, more than 73 percent said no and 27 percent said yes.

The answer from industry leaders, the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP), and some of the country's top pharmacy schools is "Yes, the need is there." The pharmacist shortage driving the trend is expected to continue; By 2030, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the estimated shortfall will rise to 38,000 pharmacists.

"Pharmacists have become more involved in clinical activities in hospitals, clinics, and even in the community pharmacy, where diabetes and asthma programs have become quite common," said Katherine Knapp, PhD, dean of the new College of Pharmacy at Touro University—California. "These trends require [the skills of] pharmacists and are important drivers of

demand." Touro University's College of Pharmacy in California opened in 2005; its first class will graduate this month.

Nonetheless, Knapp said, there is always the possibility of an "overshoot" — the threat that more programs will open than the market can support, she said. Factors such as a sufficient number of qualified applicants, the availability of qualified faculty, the ability of graduates to find positions, and the sufficiency of training sites are likely to affect the continued growth of new programs.



Wegmans School of Pharmacy, in New York State, was dedicated in 2006.

New programs aren't the only way to meet the shortage of pharmacists. Expansion of existing pharmacy schools contributes to the increasing number of pharmacy graduates each year, said Lucinda Maine, PhD, RPh, executive vice president and CEO of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy. The expansions that have taken place within the past few years weren't made as a competitive response to new pharmacy schools, she said. Instead, schools are responding to the need for a changed curriculum.

Experiential learning crunch

The proliferation of new pharmacy schools hasn't affected the numbers of students applying to existing schools, and the established schools haven't seen any reason to step up recruiting efforts in states with new pharmacy schools, such as California, Texas, Maryland, Pennsylvania, or Wisconsin. But the additional competition for resources has affected the area of experiential learning, said Mary Anne Koda-Kimble, PharmD, dean of the School of Pharmacy at the University of California, San Francisco.

Some of the new pharmacy schools have the resources to provide their students with opportunities to complete their experiential learning at local clinics and hospitals. But these facilities charge a fee for student participation, and many existing schools, such as UCSF, can't afford to pay, Koda-Kimble said.

Maine concurred. Pharmacy schools across the country have struggled to devise ways to offer their students opportunities for experiential learning, she said.

If schools are to continue to offer students strong experiential learning sites, they will have to cultivate new sites in new settings. The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) is firm about the number of rotations it requires, including those in community practice, another factor causing strain on opportunities for experiential learning.

Experiential learning isn't the only challenge schools face. "We've seen the greatest impact is in making sure there's an adequate faculty — new or existing," Maine said.

Jeffrey W. Wadelin, PhD, associate executive director and director of the ACPE Professional Degree Program Accreditation, told Drug Topics that currently there are 10 pharmacy schools with candidate status and 13 with precandidate status. He, too, commented on the challenge for new schools in finding, recruiting, and retaining faculty. And for new schools as well as for more established ones, he said, ensuring opportunities for experiential learning, is a challenge.



New York City's Touro College of Pharmacy has a capacity for 100 students annually.

"ACPE'S review and monitoring activities have focused on these key issues, and have increased in frequency and level of scrutiny to ensure quality," Wadelin said.

Maintaining quality

Another serious concern for the industry is how to ensure the balance of quality as the number of pharmacy schools increases. "There's tremendous hallway conversation at every one of my meetings about 'How can we continue to maintain quality with such a rapid expansion of pharmacy schools?'" Maine said. "We have very poor measures of quality beyond the national licensure examination."

The North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination (NAPLEX) carries weight across the country. Every state board of pharmacy lists each school's NAPLEX passing rate by year. But that's not very meaningful when the national passing rate is so high, Maine said. For many of the newer schools, it's still too early to tell whether students are passing the national licensure examination. Another possible sign of a school's quality is whether its graduates are remaining in the field after graduating — a sign of how accurately the profession was represented by the school. But no source of that information is known.

ACPE does provide a standardized alumni survey that must be completed by students who graduate from an established program as part of their comprehensive reviews. So far, according to ACPE, survey results haven't indicated many differences between graduates of new and old schools. Both student groups have the same general perceptions of the profession. The accreditation group has also completed a study of NAPLEX pass rates and found no significant differences between new and old pharmacy schools.

"It's really too early to tell whether the graduates of new schools remain in the field," Koda-Kimble said. "But these students are graduating in the healthcare field, and it's one of the

growing spaces of employment. Personally, I think gender has more to do with students leaving the field than new schools. The biological fact of the matter is that women have children and often leave the field as a result."

There will be jobs

One possible reason for the majority of Drug Topics' readers' negative response to the question on the need for more schools may be a concern about job competition. But there will be enough jobs for all the graduates from the new and expanded schools, predicts William Lang, vice president of policy and advocacy with the AACP. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that there will be 12,000 entry-level degree graduates per year by 2030. But as the country's population continues to increase and the baby-boom generation ages, demand will continue to outstrip supply.

One thing could change all that: the economy. The aggregate demand index has been rather stable and in fact was on a decrease in the past year, Lang said. "With stores reducing their hours, pharmacies are open fewer hours, and there has been some consolidation or rethinking in the expansion of markets." Because the economy is forcing store administrators to reevaluate their business plans, the industry is probably fairly close to balancing supply and demand right now.

"But the jury is still out about any long-term impact the economy will have for our industry and on the new graduates from these pharmacy schools," Maine said.

Competition shouldn't be too much of a concern for current pharmacists or graduates of established pharmacy schools, because employers depend on schools to differentiate the specialties of their students. "I think that there have always been schools that have been assumed to be different," Lang said.

An employer who wants to hire an HIV specialist for example, might turn to UCSF as a likely place for candidates, because that's where students would receive that type of advanced education. An employer seeking a clinical pharmacist for a community health center in an impoverished community where a high percentage of clients are Hispanic would probably look for a graduate from a school that gives students opportunities to work in culturally diverse environments, Lang said.



Dr. Mary Pat Seurkamp (left), Notre Dame (Maryland) president, and Dr. Anne Lin, pharmacy school dean, mark the spot where the new school will be built.

"It's not so much whether the students graduate from a new or an old pharmacy school that influences their ability to get a job and compete in the market," he said. "It's the educational opportunities they get from their school."

What's next?

It's still unclear when the pharmacy-school building boom will come to an end. Constraints on the trend include the cost of opening a new program, the availability of qualified faculty, and whether there are sufficient training sites, Knapp said. The costs involved in opening a pharmacy school are significant. In times of tight credit, a startup will be more difficult to finance.

"The boom is a complicated phenomenon. Many variables are at play that make it hard to predict when we might once again reach a stable steady-state," Wadelin said.