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## Pharmacy Colleges: A Highly Controversial Test

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### Abstract

As substance abuse continues to be problematic on college campuses across the United States, pharmacy schools in particular are faced with the challenge of deterring drug abuse among their students. Many pharmacy schools are considering the adoption of student drug-screening policies in hopes of discouraging abuse, directing impaired students to treatment, and, ultimately, protecting the public. However, these policies are being met with apprehension in regards to added costs, Fourth Amendment rights violations, and privacy concerns. Drug-screening policies continue to be an issue of deliberation for pharmacy colleges, requiring much consideration and care.

### Background

Colleges across the United States have long been faced with the responsibility of deterring substance abuse and misuse among students. Current strategies for reducing illicit drug use are typically limited to offering chemical-dependency courses and substance abuse prevention educational materials. However, universities offering professional courses in health care fields, such as nursing, pharmacy, and medicine, are being held to higher standards due to the direct patient care aspect of student training. Lately, pharmacy schools have begun developing drug-screening policies to ensure that students providing patient care are not impaired by illegal substances. This process is quite tedious and requires the consideration of several perspectives to develop a policy to meet the needs of each college of pharmacy.

### Those in Favor of Drug Screening

Pharmacy schools, first and foremost, have an obligation to protect the safety of the patient. They must ensure that pharmacy students practicing as interns will not be entering the profession with pre-existing, unresolved chemical-dependency issues. If substance screening throughout the education process can serve as a barrier to inhibit impaired pharmacists from harming patients, it is a tool well worth considering. Drug screening also can serve to direct impaired students to enter treatment for their dependency. Early onset of treatment could be the difference between casual drug use and a life-long, crippling addiction that may end a pharmacy career before it begins.

As more and more Advance Pharmacy Practice Experience (APPE) rotation sites require drug testing prior to site access, many schools feel that drug testing is becoming a standard of practice. Drug screening can serve as an inconvenience and added expense to students preparing for APPE rotations, which could be streamlined if

drug screening was provided by the pharmacy college. By monitoring drug use earlier in the student pharmacist's academic career, it can also spare wasted time and resources on a student that will not be able to finish training due to a chemical-dependency problem. Furthermore, it should be considered that student pharmacists who do not pass the final screening before APPE rotations may stain the reputation of the pharmacy college. This may prove detrimental to the pharmacy college as competition for adequate rotation sites becomes more stringent. The American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) recommends the implementation of drug screening in students. This encourages pharmacy colleges to adopt this standard in order to remain competitive with other institutions.<sup>1</sup>

A strict drug-screening policy could serve preventative purposes as well. Students may be more likely to circumvent substance use during difficult college years when both peer pressure and stress run high. By abstaining during these early years, the student is in a more favorable position for a substance-free pharmacy career. Specifically, illegal stimulant use has been perceived by some students as an aid in the pursuit of academic excellence. One survey conducted by the National Institute of Health (NIH) found that, of the undergraduate students prescribed stimulants to treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a startling 54 percent had been approached to sell or give away their medication.<sup>2</sup> Students who are considering using illegally obtained prescription drugs to boost their performance for the first time may think twice before using if the threat of screening and dismissal from pharmacy school is a possibility. This could shift the overall campus attitude toward substance abuse from a casual party habit to an irresponsible risk that could end a successful academic career, thereby reducing peer pressure for students already abstaining.

### Those Opposed to Drug Screening

However, there are arguments against drug testing in pharmacy schools. One of the issues to be addressed is the cost to perform such tests. Each school can choose to set up and run their own program or to hire a third-party company to manage the program.<sup>3</sup> The price is determined by the number and types of drugs included in screening, the type of test (i.e., urine, hair, oral fluids), and the number of tests performed. Despite which methods are used to implement and operate the program, the school is facing costs of several thousand dollars each year to cover the expense of the test kits and the laboratory fees. An article published on randomized drug testing in students estimated that if 500 tests were performed each year, with 4 percent of tests being positive, it could cost the university \$6,800 to \$12,500 or more.<sup>3</sup> In order to cover these additional costs, schools may be forced to cut costs in other areas, conduct fundraisers, apply for government grants, or raise tuition costs. Fundraisers and applying

for grants will also require an extensive amount of time and effort from staff, adding additional costs. Another point to consider is the cost of treatment for those students who are determined to have an abuse problem. Counseling services can be extremely expensive, and colleges willing to offer these services most likely will incur the costs. If the university is unwilling to provide and pay for these sessions, many students may not be able to afford the help they need.

The legality of drug testing students is another point of argument. Many individuals feel that randomized drug testing breaches the Fourth Amendment, which outlaws "unreasonable searches and seizures" as well as violates laws that presume innocence.<sup>4,5</sup> In order for student drug testing to be legal in public schools, the school must have reasonable suspicion that the student is using illicit drugs or that "special needs" apply to test all students without singling out any specific individual. Numerous court cases have been brought against school districts that have allowed testing of students. The results of these cases have varied drastically, and there is no definitive answer as to whether testing should be legal in all, some, or no situations. There also are concerns that, if drug testing is permitted, other forms of monitoring and regulations will soon be set in place that further violate personal rights.

In addition, there are concerns that student privacy may be at risk. Schools must implement stringent policies to protect student information. However, not all information can remain undisclosed. In many cases, the staff at the school/university is involved in the testing process and will know the results of each test. Also, if a student is required to receive counseling or any other services, there is a chance that this will be noticed by the student's peers, professors, or employer. This may lead to stigmas against students who have positive tests results or who require treatment for addiction problems. While drastic measures can be taken to prevent such occurrences, there often is no fool-proof method to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

### Discussion

Drug testing in pharmacy schools is quickly becoming a topic of debate. While there are many benefits to implementing a testing program for students, there are also several obstacles to consider as well. Establishing a program may help students with dependency issues get the help that they need as well as prevent students who do not use, or those who use only occasionally, from developing an addiction. However, the pharmacy college should take into consideration the list of legitimate arguments against testing. The college must be able to find funding as well as develop an air-tight system that will ensure the protection of each student's privacy and reputation. Also, where to draw the line with testing will need to be determined. If students are being tested, wouldn't it only be fair for faculty to be tested as well? Should drug tests be required during breaks, when the student is no longer at school? What happens to students who can't afford to receive help? Drug testing is a multifaceted issue requiring much consideration, and pharmacy schools should not accept or dismiss this issue lightly.

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