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Policy Matters: Development of a Legislative Advocacy Week to Engage Student Pharmacists in Policy Discussions

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The authors would like to thank the administration of the Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy at East Tennessee State University for their support of this project. We would also like to thank our colleagues at the ETSU Quillen College of Medicine for attending and engaging in policy discussion. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge and thank the American Pharmacists Association for their recognition of this project as February 2016 Student Pharmacist Champions in their Provider Status Update.

Policy Matters: Development of a Legislative Advocacy Week to Engage Student Pharmacists in Policy Discussions

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At the time of this activity, Dr. Mospan was a faculty member at East Tennessee State University Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy.

ABSTRACT

Policy and advocacy discussions and activities are generally topics that student pharmacists are less excited to engage in during their PharmD curriculum. These can also be challenging to integrate within a curriculum in a meaningful, impactful, and engaging manner. At a college of pharmacy, two student organization chapters (American Pharmacists Association-Academy of Student Pharmacists and National Community Pharmacists Association) partnered together to host a Legislative Advocacy Week centered on the primary elections for the 2016 presidential race. This Note discusses the conceptualization, planning, events, impact, and analysis of this week.

Keywords: policy, advocacy, pharmacy, interprofessional education

INTRODUCTION

Advocacy has previously been recognized as an *essential competence* for pharmacists,¹ however it can be difficult to integrate within pharmacy curricula. Previous literature has highlighted that student pharmacists may lack heavily proactive personalities, creating challenges throughout the profession's history in engaging members in policy and advocacy.²⁻⁴ There is little published on the implementation and execution of activities focused on inspiring advocacy.

At the Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy at East Tennessee State University (ETSU), two student organization chapters, NCPA [National Community Pharmacists Association] and APhA-ASP [American Pharmacists Association-Academy of Student Pharmacists], have embraced advocacy efforts and engaged student pharmacists in the legislative process.

STATEMENT OF INNOVATIONS

To further inspire their peers, these organizations came together to host a *Legislative Advocacy Week* in January 2016, with the central event being an interprofessional debate viewing party. This event showed candidate discussions from both the democrat and republican primary debates on healthcare policies. The debate viewing was developed so that student pharmacists and their colleagues in medicine could have an opportunity to critique policies, based on their view of healthcare and health careers, as opposed to by political party. Additionally, it provided an

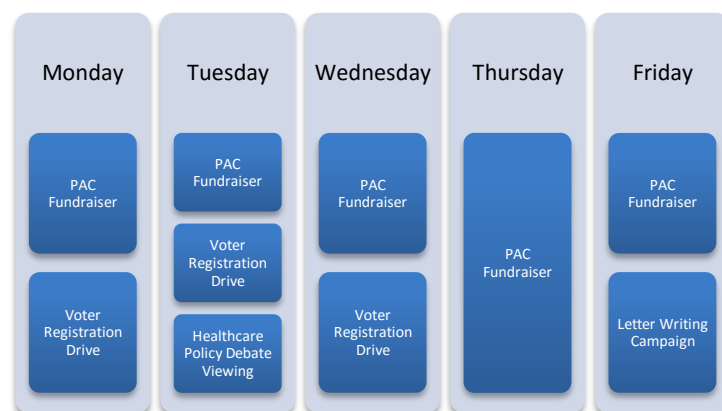
opportunity for students of different health professions to understand others' views on healthcare and health policy. Herein will be the discussion of the development, implementation, and observations of impact of this event for consideration by educators to develop similar initiatives at their institutions.

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY WEEK ACTIVITIES

Outline of Events

A planning meeting took place in early November 2015, with the event scheduled for the end of January 2016 to precede the primary elections. Organizers included executive committee members from the two chapters (NCPA and APhA-ASP), a faculty advisor, and the policy/legislative committee chairs from each organization. Collaboration was essential to be able to successfully operationalize a multitude of events and to capture a large audience of student participants. A schedule of events was outlined as described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Legislative Advocacy Week Events



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The goals of the Legislative Advocacy Week were to: 1) educate on the positions of presidential candidates impacting pharmacists, other healthcare providers, and healthcare in general; 2) promote interprofessional policy discussion; 3) facilitate engagement in the political process by registering voters; and 4) encourage participation in advocacy efforts.

Healthcare Policy Briefs

Students in healthcare programs often have limited exposure to the intricacies of politics and healthcare policy in their didactic coursework. Being cognizant of this, "Healthcare Policy Briefs" were developed by the planning committee as a companion guide to the Debate Viewing Party (described subsequently). The Briefs were designed to allow for greater exploration and comprehension of candidates' policies affecting healthcare. The document opened by providing a brief history on the evolution of health insurance in the United States and historical context illustrating the impact that a President can have on healthcare policy. The document also provided each 2016 primary presidential candidate's positions relating to healthcare policies, including previous political positions held by candidates and legislation or policy that was passed and enacted under their leadership that affected pharmacy practice or healthcare in general. (For a copy of the Presidential Candidates' Healthcare Policy Briefs, please see [Additional Files](#) posted with this manuscript.) Candidate websites were the primary means of obtaining current information and platforms, however websites, such as *On The Issues*⁵ and *I Side With*,⁶ were also used to develop the Briefs. To avoid bias, both parties were given equal representation. The faculty advisor also fact checked the Briefs to ensure policies were being presented accurately and without commentary.

The document was circulated electronically through the college's student and faculty list-servs, through organization list-servs, and on the organizations' social media's websites, and was emailed to all attendees at the *Healthcare Policy Debate Viewing*.

Healthcare Policy Debate Viewing

A key innovation in these legislative efforts was showing clips on healthcare topics from primary presidential candidate debates, including clips on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Medicaid expansion, drug importation, and legalization of marijuana amongst states. Invited attendees to the Healthcare Policy Debate Viewing (HPDV) included all student pharmacists at ETSU, as well as colleagues from the college of medicine. The goal of the HPDV was to create awareness of the impact of legislative policies on the scope of practice of healthcare professionals. The aim was for students to view candidates through the lenses of healthcare policies versus simply as a republican or democrat. This event was approximately 90 minutes in length, with equal representation of both democratic and republican party debates. Due to time constraints and the volatile tendency of political discussions, it

was requested that all conversation regarding the policies discussed in the clips take place informally after the viewing.

A faculty advisor assembled the segments, taking approximately 10 to 15 hours of work to watch the debates and to develop a list of time stamps where healthcare was being discussed. Special attention was given to showcasing each candidate, providing equal screen time for both parties, and finding topics of critical importance to healthcare professionals. When developing such an event, hosts must be careful to not show any affiliation toward a political party, especially within public institutions. At events, no faculty advisor or student leader made comments on the policies highlighted, but merely stated that these policies need to be considered as they impact one's career.

This event had an excellent turnout with 36 students attending. Inviting students from the college of medicine to attend was intended as a way to encourage and develop an interprofessional relationship between future pharmacists and physicians and to spur dialogue. It was noted that colleagues from the college of medicine came into the event with different areas of focus regarding presidential candidates' healthcare views. Many student physicians engaged with student pharmacists regarding their views and provided insights on why certain topics were of importance to them from a professional lens. Voicing differing opinions about each candidate's views sparked conversation and interest to learn more and become more involved.

Other Legislative Advocacy Week Activities

One outlet that gives pharmacists a voice within the political realm is Political Action Committees (PACs). Together, students hosted a PAC fundraiser as an additional example of engaging in the policy and advocacy process.

Another critical message during the week was the importance of engagement in the political process by becoming a registered voter, therefore a voter registration drive was held. Registration materials were brought to the college for students to complete, and the organizations provided postage and facilitated the mailing of completed registrations to simplify the process. Voter registration materials were provided for Tennessee and neighboring states as well. A total of 3 drives were hosted, with 17 voters registered. These were held far enough in advance for students to vote in the primary elections.

The last event was a letter writing campaign requesting support of H.R. 592/S. 314, the Pharmacy and Medically Underserved Areas Enhancement Act. Elected officials, most of whom are not healthcare providers, write and vote on bills that impact the profession and the pharmacist's ability to reach patients. One method to engage and help students write letters to their legislators is through the utilization of sources that provide pre-drafted letters and resources on the proposed legislation.

Utilizing tools provided, 24 students wrote letters to legislators requesting support of H.R. 592/S. 314.

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

This project was recognized in the American Pharmacists Association's Provider Status Update in February 2016 as *Student Pharmacist Champions*. Organizers were pleased with the success of the week and felt the goals were met. Knowing that politics is a heated and opinionated subject for many people, organizations must have realistic goals for student interest. The organizations intend to host a Legislative Advocacy Week annually and will seek to grow attendance over time.

Direct metrics, such as number of registered voters, are tangible outcomes; however, student organization leaders and advisors were most empowered by hallway conversations heard after these events. It appeared that students were starting to resonate with the message that everyone needs to be a registered, informed voter. Ideally, these students would also be able to develop relationships with elected officials for professional advocacy. Students from the college of medicine were looking for additional opportunities to host events similar to the debate viewing with students from the college of pharmacy, and were eager to better understand the perspectives of student pharmacists regarding prominent healthcare issues.

These legislative advocacy efforts reflect one college's attempt to answer the call to make advocacy an essential competence, not only within the profession of pharmacy, but also within multiple healthcare professions. Due to the "last minute" nature planning that can frequently occur in student pharmacist organizations, the Healthcare Policy Debate Viewing was interprofessional in attendance and not in development. To further enhance the impact of this innovation, several items should be considered: (1) the professions represented should be broadened to include more healthcare colleagues, such as nurses, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, etc.; (2) planning and design of the events should include all professions involved to ensure challenges of all professions are considered; and (3) assessment must occur to determine the impact on the participants, as well as the profession of pharmacy, and interprofessional collaboration.

Lastly, any attempts to engage student pharmacists in policy and advocacy activities need to include passionate faculty, who have dedicated time to devote to student development and support from college administration. Student engagement in any legislative endeavor may be highly dependent on the type of priority given to such activities within an institution. Since student interest has already been mentioned as a potential challenge, any foreseeable barriers should be addressed and support from the top-down is critical.

CONCLUSION

Development of a co-curricular, interprofessional legislative advocacy week was well received by both student pharmacists and student physicians, with interest in future events. With advanced planning and partnership between student organizations, similar events can be developed at other schools and colleges of pharmacy. Hosting a debate viewing centered around healthcare policy may be a way to slowly engage learners in the political process by focusing on their professional needs, desires, and worldviews, while minimizing frustrations with party lines and faults within the democratic process in the US.

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