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Research Article

Design, implementation, and evaluation of an online elective course on current topics in pharmacy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: To describe the design and implementation of the Current Topics in Professional Pharmacy online elective course and evaluate the degree to which the course improved student pharmacists' awareness of and interest in current topics affecting the profession of pharmacy.

Methods: A one-credit hour online summer elective included weekly modules of current topics affecting the profession of pharmacy, along with a longitudinal final project in which students created their own current topic module. Each module consisted of assigned reference materials and online discussion forum posts to answer discussion questions and share professional opinions. Student achievement of curricular outcomes and course-specific objectives was measured utilizing pre- and post-course surveys, assessment of weekly module forum posts, and a final course knowledge and comprehension quiz.

Results: Student self-rated awareness and desire to stay updated on current topics in pharmacy increased significantly from pre-survey to post-survey (39.7% to 98.3% agree or strongly agree, $p < 0.001$; 25.9–87.9%, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Student confidence in their ability to formulate and effectively express their professional opinion also significantly improved (67.2% to 93.1%, $p < 0.001$). Seven of the 12 course competencies assessed by the survey significantly improved from pre- to post-course. The majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that the course adequately addressed all 12 pre-selected Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Appendix B content areas.

Conclusions: Performance assessment and survey results demonstrated achievement of curricular outcomes and course objectives. Students completing the course showed an increased interest and awareness related to current topics affecting the profession of pharmacy.

Introduction

The Current Topics in Professional Pharmacy course at the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM) School of Pharmacy (SOP) is a one-credit hour online elective course offered during both four-week summer sessions conducted at ULM each academic year. Course design and content were created based on Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) 2007 Standards. Specifically,

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Standard 9, Guideline 9.3, and Standard 11 from the 2007 Standards were targeted with some course goals being to assist students in becoming “agents of change,” “active, self-directed lifelong learners,” and “to apply learning to both the present practice of pharmacy and the advancement of the profession.”¹ Since the design of this course, ACPE has released Standards 2016.² Despite the fact that the course and study were designed prior to the implementation of these updates, the course and its objectives align well with ACPE Standards 2016. The course promotes awareness of and continued engagement with current topics affecting the profession that fosters “knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and attitudes necessary to demonstrate self-awareness, leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship, and professionalism,” as detailed in Standard 4 of Standards 2016. The course also aligns with Standard 9 by promoting and creating an environment of self-directed lifelong learning at our SOP.² This course also supports Key Element 10.12 in that it promotes “student responsibility for self-directed learning.”² Additionally from Standards 2016, participating faculty believe several Appendix 1 Social/Administrative/Behavioral Sciences content areas and Key Elements 1.1, 3.2, and 3.6 are addressed in the course; however, specific content areas vary annually based on the current topics included in the course.²

A search of current literature related to student awareness of current topics in pharmacy, including the following search terms: “pharmacy education,” “current topics,” “current events,” “online course,” and “discussion forum” revealed few examples of raising this awareness in an approach similar to this course. There are descriptions of courses that integrate current events as a single project through peer-led learning and via online delivery methods; however, these are not entire online courses solely focusing on current topics.³⁻⁵ The addition of a pharmacy-related current events project and in-class presentation in a pharmacotherapy course was successful in increasing students’ awareness of current events.³ One group created an elective course to “increase pharmacy students’ awareness of legislation that might affect the pharmacy profession and to promote advocacy for the profession.”⁴ Another paper described an online course that used peer-led learning for weekly small group discussions in online forums.⁵ Similarities between our course and these courses include an increased desire to “promote the pharmacy profession” and raise awareness of topics related to the profession. Our course differs in that it was conducted online, and it was not limited to political advocacy topics affecting our profession or “controversial medication issues and the U.S. healthcare system.” Our course involved forum discussions but did not focus on debating or the use and development of “argumentation skills.”^{4,5} It does not appear that any articles reflect a school of pharmacy course exactly like the one described in this article. This course combined aspects of many of these methods and focused on a wider variety of topics currently affecting the profession.

Prior to development of this online elective course, the coordinators had identified through student interaction, classroom discussion, and faculty advising activities that student pharmacists are often not aware of current events affecting the profession of pharmacy. As a component of required courses it is difficult to address thoroughly issues affecting the profession of pharmacy, as the landscape changes rapidly. Investigators determined that the online elective detailed in this article may provide a way to address select current issues. The online format was chosen for this course primarily due to the varying locations of students outside of and across the state during the summer while participating in introductory pharmacy practice experiences (IPPEs). Online learning is a widely used and accepted format and has been proven to increase knowledge effectively.⁶

The objective of this project was to determine if an online elective course focusing on current topics affecting the landscape of professional pharmacy could improve student pharmacists’ interactions with these topics and encourage ongoing interest in pharmacy current events.

Methods

Current Topics in Professional Pharmacy was a four-week, one-credit hour online elective course offered to professional year two (P2) and professional year three (P3) students during both academic summer sessions of 2013, 2014, and 2015. Data were not collected during 2013, thus this article includes data from 2014 and 2015 course offerings. This course continues to be offered. Enrollment consisted of two sessions each summer- Summer I and Summer II. Enrollment in 2014 was 55 students (28% of IPPE students) and 67 students (37% of IPPE students) in 2015. The course was designed to expose students to current topics affecting the profession of pharmacy, while stimulating meaningful discussion and debate. The additional credit hour also qualified students as full-time status when concurrently enrolled in an IPPE, allowing them to qualify for financial aid during the summer. The online format of this course was conducted via the University’s online learning management system, Moodle™, and was scheduled to coincide with the students’ enrollment in summer IPPEs (Summer I or Summer II). Approximately 4 hours of “contact” time per week were required to meet ULM’s one-credit hour requirement.

Five faculty members co-coordinated the course and were responsible for all course components. Each of the three weekly modules was coordinated by a different faculty member, one faculty member was responsible for the comprehensive module, and the fifth faculty member was responsible for the administrative duties of the course (e.g., preparation of the syllabus and schedule, general correspondence with students, formation of student groups, and submission of final grades). This division of duties resulted in a similar workload for all involved instructors. For the first course offering, design and preparation accounted for approximately 15 hours of time, collectively. Workload was then approximately four additional hours for each faculty member. The course was structured as an online seminar series in which instructors posted reference materials and created focus questions in weekly modules. Individual components of the course are described below.

Weekly modules and discussion forums

Course content was divided into three one-week topic modules, along with one additional longitudinal module serving as the final project, culminating during week four. Course coordinators collaboratively selected current topics affecting the profession of

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