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Professional and career development needs of clinical pharmacists in settings outside academia

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Abstract

Clinical pharmacists practicing in academia have access to resources and pathways for professional development that clinical pharmacists practicing outside of academia may lack. With timely concerns of premature attrition and burnout in the clinical pharmacy profession, it is critical that employers and professional organizations help meet the professional development needs of clinical pharmacists practicing in outside of academia. Implementation of career ladders, creation of hybrid leadership-practice positions, achievement of operational excellence, cultivation of a positive culture, and development of optimal metrics may all help employers meet these needs. Professional organizations are called on to provide clinical pharmacists with a clear path for advancement within the organization to contribute to their ongoing professional development; this centers on the development of mentorship programs and opportunities to expand the professional portfolio of the clinical pharmacist practicing outside of academia. It is imperative that employers and professional organizations address the lack of existing career advancement and professional development opportunities to combat the premature attrition of clinical pharmacists from practice, improve the "life span" of the clinical pharmacist, and ultimately maintain the clinical pharmacy profession as a whole.

KEYWORDS
attrition, burnout, career ladder, clinical pharmacist, non-academia, workforce

1 | INTRODUCTION

For clinical pharmacists practicing in academia, the pathway to promotion and tenure is often clearly described in the promotion and tenure guidelines. However, in non-academia settings, the professional development and career advancement pathways are less clear. New practitioners choosing a clinical pharmacy career outside academia may first complete postgraduate training, attain a clinical position, and then

obtain board certification.[1] However, beyond these early career milestones, the path toward further advancement is unclear; therefore, these clinical pharmacists often encounter a career "plateau" within a few years of entering practice.[2,3] This plateau is fueled by several factors, including career advancement opportunities limited to exiting direct patient care and transitioning to administrative and managerial roles, clinical pharmacy practice models that offer little time away from patient care, lack of protected time for scholarship and professional organization involvement, undesirable shifts in their institution, and burnout.[4] These factors contribute to the high rates of premature attrition of clinical pharmacists from practice who are seeking non-patient care roles to improve work-life balance.[5–8]

Employers and professional organizations have an opportunity to provide resources and support for clinical pharmacists' professional development. Professional development opportunities vary across practice areas, most notably between academia and non-academia settings. For this discussion, academia include employment by colleges or schools of pharmacy/medicine, and non-academia settings include employment in all other clinical settings, such as academic medical institutions, health systems, and community-based pharmacies. Clinical pharmacists in academia have resources that clinical pharmacists outside of academia may lack for professional and career development. A survey of practicing clinical pharmacists performed by the American College of Clinical Pharmacy (ACCP) Clinical Practice Affairs Committee demonstrated a significant difference between clinical pharmacists practicing in academia and those practicing outside academia in the level of perceived professional advancement opportunities, including protected time for projects and conferences as well as career development plans.[9]

Preventing the attrition of clinical pharmacists outside academia requires rapid and reproducible solutions. Employers and professional organizations should take steps to course-correct through prioritizing career advancement opportunities while embracing the growth mindset. This is necessary to attenuate the loss of clinical pharmacists from practice, improve the "life span" of a clinical pharmacist, and advance the pharmacy profession as a whole. The 2023 ACCP Certification Affairs Committee, composed of early- and late-career clinical pharmacists and managers in academia and non-academia settings, was charged to provide perspectives on how employers and professional organizations could help meet the professional and career development needs of clinical pharmacists practicing outside academia.

2 | CONSIDERATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers play an important role in developing and retaining talented, engaged clinical pharmacists in non-academia settings. Employers are responsible for the structural opportunities, culture, and sustainability of long-term development potential. In this discussion, we propose a range of support that clinical leadership can implement to meet these needs.

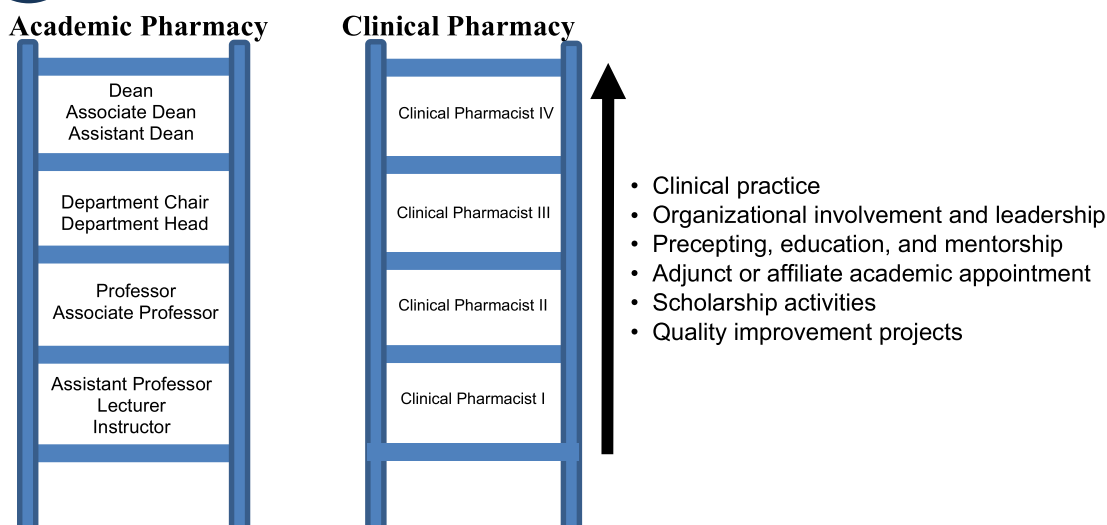When employers neglect to actively engage clinical pharmacists in long-term career planning activities, they become vulnerable to losing these employees and their wealth of knowledge and experience. Career ladders provide a vision, navigational plan, and incentive for professional development.[10] They create motivation for clinical pharmacists to remain loyal to the institution while being committed to professional growth, which ultimately benefits their employers. In early careers, career ladders provide a structure to plan a career path. Later, they foster continued engagement and growth within the organization (Figure 1). Career ladders should not solely reward years of service, but rather define value and reward clinical pharmacists who go above and beyond using achievable steps and objective, rather than subjective, criteria. Examples of clinical pharmacy career ladders have been elucidated in the literature.[11,12] Although evidence suggests that developing career ladders can help slow attrition in health care, such research is lacking in clinical pharmacy specifically.[13]

Solutions focused on slowing attrition can save institutions thousands of dollars in direct and indirect costs associated with the recruitment and training of new employees, minimize gaps in timely patient care, and decrease burnout of residual staff.[8] It is imperative to create an environment that allows employees with more advanced skills and experience to maximize their potential while lower-level tasks and roles are undertaken by those earlier in development.[10] Strong employer-driven mentorship and coaching programs for clinical pharmacists throughout their career ensure the sustainability of this model.[14] Those who achieve the highest career ladder level may be best engaged by transitioning into a mentoring role of less-experienced clinical pharmacists and off-loading various duties performed at lower levels of the career ladder. This model will help retain experienced clinical pharmacists as strong mentors and combat their attrition from practice.

As an adjunct to career ladders, hybrid positions that encompass leadership opportunities while maintaining a degree of direct patient care provide the clinical pharmacist with opportunities to retain and develop new skills. Rather than separating all administrative responsibilities into singular positions, tailored responsibilities and designations can be added, such as clinical program coordination. This approach mirrors the leadership development opportunities afforded to physicians and allows clinical pharmacists additional advancement options, benefiting the organization through lower attrition rates.[15]

Achieving optimal clinical excellence depends on operational excellence. Pharmacy departments must recruit and retain operational staff and develop creative solutions to offset the clinical pharmacist workload. Examples include engaging technicians and interns in medication reconciliation and "tech-check-tech" initiatives.[16,17] These solutions free up time for the clinical pharmacist to perform more clinical duties and those perceived as more enjoyable to the individual.

Creating and maintaining a positive culture is an important predictor for retention[18]; a recent survey of clinical pharmacists specifically demonstrated that working with difficult pharmacists was correlated with burnout, whereas working with difficult physicians did not have this same correlation.[5] A culture well-suited for clinical pharmacist development structurally and financially supports their development and integrates the professional interests of the individual with the

Academic Pharmacy

Clinical Pharmacy

Dean
Associate Dean
Assistant Dean

Department Chair
Department Head

Professor
Associate Professor

Assistant Professor
Lecturer
Instructor

Clinical Pharmacist IV

Clinical Pharmacist III

Clinical Pharmacist II

Clinical Pharmacist I

- Clinical practice
- Organizational involvement and leadership
- Precepting, education, and mentorship
- Adjunct or affiliate academic appointment
- Scholarship activities
- Quality improvement projects

FIGURE 1 Schematic of the clinical pharmacy practice ladder.[11,12] Specific criteria in pharmacy practice requirements, educational and training involvement, scholarly initiatives, quality improvement projects, and leadership requirements define advancement to the next level of clinical pharmacist. Responsibilities that are more operational are peeled away from pharmacists' workload as their clinical experience and skill development expand beyond entry-level expectations.

needs of the institution. The validated Maslach Burnout Inventory identifies the inverse relationship between personal accomplishment and burnout.[19] Workplaces can create the structure for clinical pharmacists to stay connected to their "why" in several ways (Table 1). It is important to recognize that money and structure cannot replace the critical values that create a positive culture such as diversity, authenticity, and gratitude. Rewards and recognition support a positive culture and have been extensively discussed elsewhere.[9]

Finally, recognizing, defining, and measuring the organizational value of clinical pharmacists ensures their relevance while off-loading less-valuable data collection responsibilities, such as intervention documentation or medication use evaluations, from individual clinical pharmacists. Efforts should be made to thoughtfully align organizational quality metrics and employer goals with the professional development goals of each clinical pharmacist. Through greater focus on quality and cost-effective patient outcomes, an organization may coalesce around a metric with more relevance to all stakeholders.[20]

3 | CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Professional organizations serve as professional home to provide clinical pharmacists with a multitude of resources to achieve practice excellence. Of importance, these organizations are positioned to serve as steadfast advocates for the profession of clinical pharmacy. In addition to making current resources visible, several initiatives can be implemented by professional organizations to meet the needs of career advancement for pharmacists practicing outside of academia.

Practitioners in non-academia settings often find themselves questioning the next steps in their career after major career milestones. Some practitioners may decide to pursue mid-career changes

or promotions that require a different subset of skills or knowledge. Professional organizations should advertise and provide support for accessible and attainable educational programming such as certificates and sabbaticals (or mini-sabbaticals) to equip practitioners with the expertise needed to succeed in a new mid-career endeavor in a new practice area or clinical research method. Sabbaticals can also guide practitioners by providing a clear path within the professional organization to either leadership or scholarship opportunities and in their personal careers. In addition, to provide a clear path for achievement, organizations with Fellow recognition programs should make the rubric and selection criteria known, objective, and attainable for clinical pharmacists practicing in outside academia.[21]

Mentoring is a key component of professional growth for the early- and mid-career clinical pharmacist. Mentoring is a routine component of both student and postgraduate training provided by many professional organizations. However, once individuals enter their first long-term position, formal mentoring programs and opportunities may terminate abruptly, leaving new practitioners to forge their own path when more personal development needed is still needed. In addition, a practitioner might need mentoring while considering, or after making a mid-career move.[22,23] Although employers may assist in this area, this mentoring is usually focused on jobs and less on overall personal development. Further research is needed in demonstrating the effectiveness of mentorship on the development of the clinical pharmacist in the post-training setting.

Many of ACCP's Practice and Research Networks as well as other professional organizations such as the Society of Critical Care Medicine, the American Heart Association, and the Hematology/Oncology Pharmacy Association offer ongoing mentoring programs for early practitioners. More professional organizations could offer such programs to benefit clinical pharmacists practicing outside academia, as described by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy in

TABLE 1 Structural support for employers to provide to foster personal accomplishment for clinical pharmacists practicing outside of academia.

Financially support business-paid time away (non-PTO) and expenses to attend conferences, especially if presenting or serving on a committee
Financially support and encourage involvement in professional organizations
Provide mentorship through routine meetings between clinical pharmacists and managers to discuss the clinical pharmacist's professional development goals
Recognize professional accomplishments such as publications, speaking opportunities, and leadership positions as beneficial to both the individual and the institution
Establish an equitable practice model to provide an infrastructure that supports practice coverage for time away from direct patient care activities for off-site professional development activities
Connect clinical pharmacists with resources that assist in their professional development
Provide designated time within the workday to engage in on-site development activities: • Activities built into the schedule • System that allows employees to "cash out" a set amount of development time to block schedule and/or have workload covered by peers • Create opportunities for more involved projects mirroring the academic sabbatical
Design performance-based metrics that appropriately match the workload and skills of clinical pharmacists throughout their career[a]
Support career ladders for professional growth
Provide resources for well-being as outlined in the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) residency standards[b]

Abbreviation: PTO, paid time off.

[a]Reference [20].

[b]American Society of Health-System Pharmacists. ASHP accreditation standards for PGY1 pharmacy residencies. 2022. Available from: https://www.ashp.org/professional-development/residency-information/residency-program-resources/residency-accreditation/accreditation-standards-for-pgy1-pharmacy-residencies?loginreturnUrl=SSOCheckOnly; American Society of Health-System Pharmacists. ASHP accreditation standards for PGY2 pharmacy residencies. 2022. Available from: https://summer-uat2.ashp.org/professional-development/residency-information/residency-program-resources/residency-accreditation/accreditation-standards-for-pgy2-pharmacy-residencies?loginreturnUrl=SSOCheckOnly.

academia.[24–27] Pairing early practitioners with more established or senior members for mentorship, networking, and professional development could help early-career clinicians achieve greater career satisfaction as they move forward, increasing career longevity. Involvement of both early- and late-career practitioners in the endeavors of professional organizations is paramount because the participation of less-experienced clinicians will provide a pipeline for future leaders within the organization.

Clinical pharmacists practicing outside academia who may not have built a strong scholarship portfolio because of a position that places a higher emphasis on patient care may find it challenging to obtain opportunities for scholarly activities. Organizations should help support their scholarship interests. Within organizations, there are research committees or subcommittees in which early- or mid-career clinicians can participate to develop and conduct scholarly works with more seasoned mentors. Specific scholarship mentoring programs may help practitioners seeking professional development to navigate the challenges of identifying a research topic, executing a well-thought-out research question, and transitioning a poster to a manuscript publication. However, these committees are not ubiquitous across practice areas, and access to these programs should be expanded. Significant barriers to participation exist with these programs, namely financial burdens and inability to take time away from employment. Early-career practitioners and those practicing outside academia could be offered national speaking opportunities with the option to collaborate with mentors for presentation development, which would improve their professional satisfaction and desire to continue similar activities in the future. These types of programs would help practitioners develop their presentation skills as well as the professional organization develop future speakers for conferences. ACCP offers mentored research opportunities through the Immersive Mentored Skill Development Program, the Mentorship Research Investigator Training Program, and the Focused Investigator Training Program. In addition, ACCP offers the Research and Scholarship Academy, which is designed to develop foundational clinical research and scholarly abilities.

Many practitioners also desire leadership positions within professional organizations but may feel unqualified because of a lack of knowledge surrounding organizational processes, leaving more experienced members to hold these positions. Concerted efforts should be made to engage, mentor, and provide leadership opportunities to members who do not historically volunteer in the organization, particularly new practitioners. By creating resources like the ACCP Professional Leadership Development program that demonstrate how to prepare for applying or campaigning for these leadership positions, the organization would expand the pool of applicants while bringing innovative ideas and energy to the organization. Similarly, for clinical pharmacists practicing outside academia who desire leadership positions within or outside their practice setting, organizations should offer leadership development opportunities, like the ACCP Leadership and Management Academy.

Finally, advertising and encouraging involvement through the provision of micro-tasks or "micro-volunteering" will provide other avenues for member participation that may be less time-consuming than formal leadership roles and scholarship. Micro-tasks are typically simple, one-time activities usually limited to a short time and may include reviewing a curriculum vitae or abstract, serving as a poster mentor, leading a social media discussion, and creating visual abstracts. These micro-tasks provide opportunities for members who cannot commit to more time-intensive initiatives within the organization. Currently, many of these opportunities can be accessed year-round through the ACCP Volunteer Opportunities sign-up tool.

4 | CONCLUSION

Clinical pharmacy practice among clinical pharmacists outside academia is currently at a critical juncture in an era where there is substantial burnout, premature attrition from practice, and an unclear and nonlinear pathway toward career advancement. Employers and professional organizations have an obligation to address the systemic issues that persist in clinical pharmacy in settings outside academia that lead to these outcomes among clinical pharmacists. Support from employers and professional organizations together with motivation from pharmacists to seek out and complete professional development and career opportunities will be paramount in overcoming the career advancement challenges that exist for clinical pharmacists practicing outside academia. This paper presents a path forward with several practical, actionable recommendations to support the developmental needs of the clinical pharmacist.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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