

“How can I advance my teaching skills beyond my residency teaching certificate?”

Thomas Schultz, PharmD
PGY1 Pharmacy Resident
University of Virginia Health System
Charlottesville, VA

This is a very interesting question that you pose and one that many new practitioners and educators have had at some point. I know that I had the exact same question not too many years ago. Here you are finishing or about to finish your residency teaching certificate and feeling proud of that accomplishment. Then you sit back and say, “Am I really ready to use this information?” We have all had this thought at some point. The good news is that while we have all thought this, there are definitely ways to enhance and fine-tune those skills you have been developing during your residency teaching certificate program.

When it comes to teaching and the pharmacy educational environment, I often think about one of my favorite quotes from University of Alabama head football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant: “It’s not the will to win that matters ... everyone has that. It’s the will to prepare to win that matters.” The “win,” in this case, is being effective in the classroom or in the experiential setting with pharmacy students and/or residents. Part of the “will to prepare” is doing exactly what you are doing now and taking part in the teaching certificate program. The fact that this question is being asked about advancing skills beyond that program demonstrates that you already have that will to prepare to “win.” This may sound like it lacks value, but having the desire to improve and strengthen your skills is the most important step in advancing your abilities when it comes to being an effective educator. Without a will and strong commitment, the chances of optimizing your skills decrease drastically. So, with this question being posed, you have taken a vital first step.

While teaching experiences and responsibilities may be natural for some positions, they may not be for others. At any position, during any point in your career, you can seek out opportunities to interact with students. Schools of pharmacy are always looking for adjunct faculty to deliver a lecture, lead a discussion group, perform assessments, or precept students. These are great opportunities to practice your teaching abilities even if you aren’t in a direct teaching position. Get involved and be hands-on with teaching and education of the future of pharmacy!

There is no substitute for experience, and mentoring can be invaluable. Many institutions have some form of a mentoring program available and will assign a mentor or mentors to mentees. If the institution that you are part of engages in such a process, accept it with open arms. If it doesn’t, there is no need to fret. Seek out a mentor. This can be one individual or even multiple individuals who align well with the various types of teaching in which you are engaging students. If you don’t feel comfortable with the traditional one-on-one mentor-mentee relationship, think about developing a group of mentees who are in a similar situation. Often, having two or more individuals in your same situation and finding a mentor for those individuals can be a way to enhance idea sharing and the overall comfort level of the

group. This can place additional workload on the mentor, but often, that person enjoys interacting with a greater number of people. When setting up a mentoring relationship or relationships, an important concept to remember is that time is of the essence. The earlier these interactions are developed, the more likely that positive outcomes and effective overall mentoring experiences will occur. Subsequently, this will maximize the intent of mentoring to enhance your teaching abilities.

Establishing a mentoring relationship with an individual at your institution who has experience in the area in which you are hoping to advance your skills opens an endless amount of opportunities. That mentor can share previous experiences (positive and negative), offer tips, review materials, observe teaching skills, and complete evaluations. These are just a few examples; don't limit yourself to these. In addition, don't sit back and wait for these to happen or your mentor to offer assistance. Consider preemptively scheduling sessions to discuss these items and ensure that they occur. This will help with your schedule, but your mentor will also likely appreciate the proactive approach you are taking to ensure the success of the mentoring relationship.

Because you are not alone in your search to expand your teaching skills, numerous training institutes and professional development programs are available. One specifically that has been helpful to numerous new pharmacy educators is the ACCP Teaching and Learning Academy. There are two distinct advantages to this Academy. The first is that it requires you to identify a mentor at the beginning, which establishes the relationship described earlier. Second is the requirement to complete assignments along the way through a portfolio. You are learning and advancing skills beyond your teaching certificate, both didactic and experiential, during the in-person sessions, and you are subsequently using the information to create materials such as course syllabi, lecture outlines, and teaching philosophy statements. The Academy creates an environment for networking with individuals, who, like you, are seeking to advance their teaching skills.

In all avenues of professional development, networking can be an important component to growth. This is also true with growth in your teaching abilities. One networking tool that I have found helpful is the ACCP Education and Training Practice and Research Network (PRN). This PRN creates a forum for addressing academic issues related to education and training. Networking at the Annual Meeting through this PRN can drastically enhance your teaching abilities. Don't be afraid to use the PRN email list to reach out to fellow members to seek or provide information throughout the year.

From the beginning, know that initially things won't be perfect. Having realistic expectations for your first lecture, first Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experience students, or first resident learning experience will help you keep perspective. No one has had the perfect rotation or perfect lecture right after obtaining their teaching certificate. In fact, I would argue that no one has ever had the perfect rotation or lecture. It's not how your first experiences go with teaching; it's what changes to your skills and abilities you make along the way. Perform regular self-assessment and use mentor, peer, and student evaluations to enhance your

abilities. Be careful not to take all student evaluations to heart, but look for those evaluations with themes and reasonable suggestions for change.

Remember, it's not how your first teaching experience goes after your teaching certificate. It's what you do along the way through mentoring, professional development programs, networking, and consistent evaluation to make yourself better. It's not the will to "win," it's the preparing, changing, and constantly enhancing your abilities to "win" that matters.

Andrew J. Crannage, Pharm.D., BCPS
Associate Professor of Pharmacy Practice
St. Louis College of Pharmacy
St. Louis, MO