

Precepting Learners: A Dream Come True (... or is it?)

“Your residency will involve a lot of precepting,” said my residency program director on the first day of orientation to PGY1.

“YES! Perfect! This is a dream come true,” I thought as I snatched the resident rotation schedule and scanned the list for the months I would precept student learners. Throughout the years of being a student pharmacist, I had looked up to my preceptors, in awe of their knowledge. They had provided me with professional growth and mentorship and had bridged the gap between textbooks and real-life clinical scenarios. At last, it was my turn to be a preceptor and pass on my knowledge to student learners.

I was scheduled to have five APPE students during my PGY1 residency year, in addition to a longitudinal IPPE student in the spring semester. I could not have been happier to take these students under my wing and become the “best preceptor ever.” During my second rotation, I had my first preceptor assignment. My preceptor inquired what degree of involvement I wanted in precepting. After confidently telling her that I wanted to serve as the primary preceptor, she smiled and said, “Okay, we will see how it goes.”

Despite beginning day one of precepting with more than an average dose of optimism, I found it much harder than I could have ever dreamt. It started with the learner asking me approximately seven questions that I had no clue how to answer. Then I found myself staying late to read, re-read, edit, and co-sign my student’s note in the EHR. By 7 p.m., I still hadn’t even begun preparing for the topic discussion on acute decompensated heart failure that I was scheduled to lead the next day. Needless to say, I was feeling quite humbled and defeated as I walked to my car that night. How did I ever think precepting was going to be an exciting walk in the park?

Unfortunately, the entire first week of precepting did not prove to be much different from day one. I was in awe of past preceptors who had made this job look so enjoyable and stress free. By the second week, I was ready to admit that I was in over my head. After a discussion with my preceptor, we agreed that a co-precepting role would be best. Although I cannot say I became the “best preceptor ever” by the last week of rotation, I had grown during the rotation. As the year went on, I began to learn from my precepting mistakes and transform into a more competent and confident preceptor. By the conclusion of the PGY1 residency, I had collected a handful of precepting pearls to share with those of you who find yourselves in the early stages of precepting:

- (1) Establish expectations on day one. Start the rotation by providing the learner with a calendar outlining the planned activities for the month. Provide them with a list of their rotation-specific responsibilities so that there is no question of what they are (or are not) responsible for. This will help give you objective data behind your learner’s assessment to ensure they are meeting rotation requirements.

- (2) Act professionally. Sometimes, the students will notice that you are a young, fresh professional and begin to treat you as a friend instead of a preceptor. I quickly learned that acting like my learner's best buddy was not key to being the "best preceptor ever." It can become difficult to assign tasks and provide constructive feedback to your learners when they perceive themselves as a friend rather than a trainee. Establish boundaries to the preceptor-trainee relationship and stick to them throughout the entire rotation.
- (3) Give feedback promptly. Almost every preceptor guide recommends giving on-the-spot, real-time feedback, and I could not agree more. By giving timely feedback and recording the feedback in an organized manner, you will eliminate a 3-hour-long session of sitting down to think through and develop feedback for your learners. In addition, your learners will continually be reminded of the things they are doing well and the things they can improve on, and they can make adjustments accordingly.
- (4) Learn from difficult situations. When you feel like you have failed as a preceptor, use this opportunity to learn from your mistakes. Find your preceptor as soon as possible and fill them in on the situation. Ask them if they have ever encountered it, listen to their input, and reflect on how you can improve.
- (5) Utilize your learners as pharmacist-extenders. Many of us struggle to delegate tasks, thinking it would be easier to just do it ourselves. However, don't forget that your APPE student is only a few months from graduation and would greatly benefit from taking on a more active role during rotation. For example, I oversaw my student perform a handful of medication reconciliations. For a student, this is an opportunity to learn how to collect patient-specific information, practice patient interviewing skills, and learn the indication for new medications. Once I felt the student was competent, I allowed them to take on that responsibility and truly own it. Never underestimate the ability of your learners!

About the author: Katie Stollar is currently completing her PGY2 pharmacy residency in ambulatory care at Beaumont Hospital-Royal Oak in Royal Oak, Michigan. Although she is uncertain about the next step in her career, she knows it will involve precepting learners. During her PGY1 residency, Katie led efforts to create a formalized preceptor development program for residency program preceptors. Throughout her current PGY2 residency, she strives to identify ways to integrate learners into her practice setting. Although she acknowledges that precepting is more challenging than she once perceived, she is passionate about continuing to develop her preceptor skills and aims to make a difference in the professional journey of her learners.