

Virtual Social Networking Hours: A Vital Personal and Professional Avenue for Connecting Pharmacy Leadership Educators

Gregory M. Zumach, PharmD, BCPS¹; Whitney D. Maxwell, PharmD, MBA²; Kerry K. Fierke, EdD³

¹Department of Pharmacy Practice and Science, University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Pharmacy

²Department of Clinical Pharmacy and Outcomes Sciences, University of South Carolina College of Pharmacy

³Department of Pharmacy Practice and Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy, Duluth

Abstract

The American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Leadership Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) created a Virtual Social Networking Hour (VSNH). The VSNH explored pharmacy leadership educators' connections through discussing topics of interest that influence current teaching and scholarship practices. The VSNH also served to connect members in the LD SIG through informal networking, which was vital during a time when in-person connection was heavily restricted due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The VSNH functioned as both a space for members to connect with LD SIG leadership and other members of the LD SIG and a tool to areas of leadership development the SIG should explore in future programming. Each of the four sessions included a skeleton structure that grew organically based on the conversations of the attendees. Common themes of scholarship, adaptation to a virtual landscape, leadership, and student-focused endeavors were interwoven across all four sessions. The VSNHs have since become an integral component in LD SIG Programming.

Keywords: leadership, connection, networking, accessibility, innovation

Introduction

When managed effectively, challenges lead us to create. A variety of challenging circumstances prompted the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Leadership Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) to create virtual forums for members to communicate, connect, and collaborate. In 2018, a Virtual Symposium (VS) was created in response to a need for a forum for LD SIG members to present programmatic and scholarly initiatives related to leadership development. Conversion of national professional development meetings during the COVID-19 global pandemic to a virtual forum led to a vacuum of live networking opportunities that the LD SIG responded to innovatively with creation of a Virtual "Think Tank" Session designed to facilitate collaboration through development of programmatic and scholarly initiatives called Collaborative Leadership Initiative Plans (CLIPs). Use of these virtual platforms focused networking paved the way for creation of a Virtual Social Networking Hour (VSNH), which provided an outlet for informal networking. The VSNHs allowed members to connect with one another during a global pandemic in a more socially oriented way to discuss leadership during trying times. "The purpose of a virtual conference is to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment while reducing the need for on-site attendance, expand access by allowing participants to engage at various times and from various locations".^{1,2}

This multi-modal approach by the LD SIG created a wide sweeping approach to the virtual process to communicate, connect and collaborate with members. Multiple virtual platforms are required to fully replicate the professional development process that occurs through in-person conferences, including virtual learning, virtual networking, and virtual collaboration opportunities. The innovations described in this series of manuscripts represent three unique, but complementary aspects necessary to fully replicate in-person professional development opportunities available during in-person conferences. This three-part series highlights the importance of a diverse approach to virtual professional development when in-person opportunities are not available. As described in a previously published article ([Innov Pharm. 2021;12\(3\):Article 22.](#)), the VS replicated the need to present scholarly work and allow communication for critique, questions, and the ability to learn through presentations and posters.³ The CLIPs Virtual "Think Tank" described in a second article ([Innov Pharm. 2022;13\(2\):Article 18.](#)) served to intentionally cultivate connections between like-minded academicians interested in leadership development.⁴ The VSNH, which is described in this manuscript, provided a space for the natural need to connect with colleagues in an organic format about relative issues. The elements of each of these virtual platforms were developed out of necessity. While each innovation was designed and originally intended to be in person, they were transferred successfully in a virtual format.

Corresponding author: Gregory M. Zumach, PharmD, BCPS
University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Pharmacy
Department of Pharmacy Practice and Science
986145 Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha, NE 68198
Phone: 630-347-4247; Email: Gzumach@unmc.edu

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered normal work and personal activities. From an academic perspective, the downstream effects of the pandemic included the cancellation of in-person events, an abrupt transition to remote learning, and disruption of scholarship and practice. Colleagues no longer had a designated outlet to communicate or collaborate in the

same way they had grown accustomed to over their career. The lack of ability to connect was a startling change for many individuals who benefited from informal networking opportunities inherent to these events. In a review of the literature on informal networking, Jewels and colleagues described informal networks as relationships developed between individuals independently of any formal structure⁵. In response to the pandemic, the EC created a Virtual Social Networking Hour (VSNH) to address this lack of connection amongst colleagues. Each VSNH explored leadership educators' connections through topic discussion related to current teaching and scholarship practices. The VSNH served as a vital outlet in order titled "The Quarantined Leader: Leading Remotely during Unprecedented Times." Each scheduled VSNH brought together members from across the organization to troubleshoot challenges, communicate with colleagues, and connect.

Design

The idea of the VSNH originated out of necessity in order to address the crisis climate all academicians experienced during the pandemic. Feedback from key stakeholders and executive committee members within the organization influenced the design structure. A podcast episode from the organization's podcast (Leadership Development in Pharmacy Education podcast) featured a discussion titled "Leading Remotely" spurred the genesis of the idea.⁶ Feedback from members from that podcast episode fostered further discussion from the EC regarding the need for more social connection. Therefore, the EC created a social hour for all members to take part.

The purpose of the VSNH was to create a space for remote small-group informal networking amongst the membership regarding the global pandemic impact on leadership in pharmacy education. VSNHs ranged between 30-60 minutes, adaptable to the topic and the number of people attending. The VSNH required minimal planning and facilitation. The AACP Connect[®] platform was used to disseminate invitations, a description, and links. All participants RSVP'd to receive a link to attend. The LD SIG sent communications to the SIG Members and calendar invitations to those who RSVP'd, those who had previously attended, and to LD SIG executive committee members.

The VSNHs were hosted on a video-conferencing platform by Zoom Video Communications, Inc. (referred to as a Zoom session). Zoom sessions were available through facilitators who had access through their respective institutions; therefore, there was no cost to participants. Implementation required neither significant time nor financial resources. The VSNH incorporated breakout rooms during multiple social hours based on the content, theme, and structure. When Zoom breakout rooms were used, a technology coordinator would manage the rooms. Facilitators introduced topics to begin discussions. While there was a skeleton structure of questions

for each session, the nature of the VSNHs allowed for free-flowing discussion and content that could pivot based on the needs of the group. The EC did not envision the entire duration of the Covid-19 global pandemic at the outset of initiation of the VSNHs. Roughly two months into the pandemic, on May 6th, 2020, the EC hosted a VSNH on the topic "Adapting to a Remote Workplace." As the semester ended, an opportunity to share best practices that took place during the abrupt remote teaching transition arose through a second VSNH addressing the topic, "Incorporating Lessons Learned into the Classroom," which took place two weeks later. As the pandemic continued, topics evolved, as was pertinent to the members leading to sessions such as the "New Normal" and "Resilience and Well-being".

The initial VSNH topics were relevant to pharmacy academicians experiencing the Covid-19 global pandemic. While the relevance of the initial pandemic topics has waned over time, the format of the VSNHs established a longitudinal method for members to gather informally in a casual yet organized and intentional way. This precedent of organic virtual gatherings now provides an enduring forum for time-sensitive, high-priority topics to be addressed in the future. The added value of VSNH has been the opportunity to continue discussing best practices, sharing ideas, and fostering the interconnectedness of a community of members around the topic of leadership.

Adapting to a Remote Workplace

This pilot session's goals included sharing experiences and learning from one another. As many participants shared their frustrations with this remote workplace, others offered positivity and helpful suggestions. Self-care became a critical topic. Participants identified the need to set boundaries around time while working remotely to maintain an appropriate work/life balance and cast a vision for surviving the new normal.

The VSNH allowed participants to share personal anecdotes regarding different leadership strategies that attendees found to be helpful amid the uncertainty of the pandemic. Leadership experiences, enriching resources, and pertinent topics, including adaptability and flexibility, all became key points of discussion. A crucial talking point included becoming comfortable delaying critical leadership decisions while facing the unknown and not instantly solving all problems. Other participants noted that with the rapidly changing landscape of the pandemic, there was a period of information overload that made it challenging to operate at their normal levels of efficiency.

Incorporating Lessons Learned into the Classroom

As it became apparent that the pandemic would continue to require remote learning, the second VSNH served as an ideal platform to discuss educational lessons learned. The session

became one of instructors helping instructors as members shared strategies, successes, and opportunities in the classroom. The goal was to not only survive in the classroom but thrive and improve in the virtual landscape. Educational lessons included incorporating a virtual platform to allow students to compete against one another to answer questions, optimal discussion boards to foster dialogue asynchronously, and Leadership Advisory Boards. Other members broached topics related to technical details in recording lectures and managing group sizes.

This VSNH incorporated breakout rooms with the four available groups stratified by discussion topic. The four rooms were: Using Active Learning Tools Virtually, Administering Exams & Assessments Virtually, Virtual Group Work & Discussion Boards, and Helping Students Manage Isolation & Burnout. As educators met during the VSNH breakouts, the topics focused on academic pearls, including strategies to ensure academic integrity and mitigate student burnout. Student burnout became a critical topic for members, as it is an issue that has already raised national attention. The session concluded with members vowing to foster a positive and supportive community in the virtual learning environment.

The "New Normal"

The third VSNH served as a pivot point for the direction of the series. The session leaders created it intentionally to serve the broad interests of networking and collaboration. In VSNH 3 "New Normal", the session incorporated aspects of both previous VSNHs. Timing of VSNH 3 coincided with the AACP Annual Meeting (held remotely in June 2020). Before the session, the executive committee solicited topics of interest from members based on feedback from participants in previous sessions. The topics ranged from managing clinical practices, which were severely affected by the pandemic, to the anticipation of returning to virtual learning at the start of the new term.

Clinical practice suggestions included ways to overcome challenges with telehealth. Members appreciated the flexibility that came with telehealth and were glad to be allowed at practice sites with students but wondered if this process would continue in a post-pandemic landscape.

Participants of the third VSNH spoke about the need to be quick to think and have contingency plans. Other participants had reached a proverbial wall at the four-month mark of remote connection. Virtual faculty meetings & department meetings exhausted the members. Others spoke about how they missed the interpersonal relationship with colleagues and experienced an overall decline in professional satisfaction. Participants appreciated the flexibility of working from home but found it challenging to compartmentalize work and home. Some members viewed the challenges brought on by the pandemic as ripe for scholarship opportunities for innovation. Specific

topics referenced were how to create and lead a virtual APPE and to how to revamp content into a virtual format.

Resilience and Well-being

The capstone VSNH in this series took place six months after the first event and was the VSNH that intentionally featured new members. Participants of the fourth VSNH discussed strategies that have helped them cope with the dramatic changes on personal and professional levels. Multiple members provided examples of sharing positivity with their colleagues and students. Faculty wrote inspirational emails or recorded videos of encouragement. Others focused their attention on motivating students through meal-delivery services or providing students an ability to share their successes with a "win board."

Discussion

The VSNHs evolved to serve as a bridge within the LD SIG by introducing new members and as a pulse check to current LD SIG members at a critical moment in time. The purpose was to create a space that included a "live" session to meet and connect with executive officers and members of the LD SIG. In response to the pandemic, the Leadership Development SIG strived to gather people together at a critical moment in time and discuss and capture topics of interest to keep a pulse on the overall membership. The goal of the VSNH was to establish a medium through which members could connect and share personal and professional strategies filling the need for informal networking.

Informal networking is a powerful tool in organizations. These informal networks may aid in the "trading of information" amongst individuals with shared experiences. We found that to be the case in the VSNHs. While knowledge transfer in geographic clusters has previously been an important aspect of informal networking, the VSNH provides a geographically delocalized mechanism of knowledge transfer around shared interest areas.⁷

Membership turnout at each meeting was consistent and required no financial resources. Since the content was remote, membership could connect if interested regardless of location. Content featured in each VSNH was unique to each meeting, though it shared common threads of interconnectedness and problem-solving. During the initial VSNHs, participants would not have imagined how critical the skills such as resilience and well-being would be in enduring the global pandemic's effects. However, by the fourth session, both resilience and well-being became necessary skills.

The sessions began with a skeleton of topic discussions, but the intention was to allow the membership to steer the content organically, which occurred in each of the four sessions. A helpful tool in that plan was incorporating breakout rooms, which was an available functionality built into the Zoom digital

platform. Early sessions occurred in the beginning stages of the pandemic process, so some members found the breakout rooms a foreign concept. These sessions found a technology coordinator to be a necessity. As the pandemic continued and more members became more familiar with the platform, the technology coordinator became less of a requirement, though the position remained through these four sessions.

The VSNHs have become a solid addition in the ever-evolving virtual offering of the LD SIGs. An essential outcome of virtual offerings included the dynamic shift that it caused in LD SIG programming since its inception. First the Virtual Symposium helped the engagement of new members. Second, the VSNH has kept them connected. Even in the pandemic climate, the VSNH provided an avenue for membership to remain engaged both personally and professionally. One limitation associated with the VSNH is that while all members were invited, only a small percentage of the approximately one thousand LD SIG members participated. It was extremely important to capitalize on the interested cohort's participation, allowing them to seize their opportunity to increase connectedness and engagement within the organization. However, a large sector of the LD SIG did not opt to allocate time toward this opportunity, so future efforts to engage a larger percentage of the organizational membership are warranted.

The VSNHs allow the executive committee to deploy the meetings creatively while tailoring them to specific content and specific members. As an opportunity to connect to new LD SIG Members, the fourth VSNH ("Resilience and Well-being") included an invitation to these members. This intentional connection sparked an ongoing process, which continues on in subsequent programming. For instance, the Leadership Development SIG has held VSNHs with the explicit plan to guide new members to the organization, introducing each participant into various opportunities for committee participation, and providing collaborative scholarship opportunities.

Conclusion

The VSNH provided a platform for fostering connection amongst the members of the EC in a time of global turmoil. There was never a more critical time to explore these virtual connections than during the COVID-19 pandemic. This VSNH became an avenue for members to experience informal networking during a vacuum of in-person events. The VSNH offers a valuable model to incorporate in organizations that strive to connect membership while allowing participants to shape content. This model can evolve into a format that addresses the current and future needs of the organization.

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