

Yes, and...?: Reframing pharmacy faculty turnover as interconnectedness and relationality

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Introduction

“You won’t be teaching anymore?” was my horrified response when a close colleague confided she would be leaving academia after just one year to return to full-time clinical practice. I was saddened to hear this news, because I thought so highly of her talent in the classroom. She maintained high standards for students, which is not easy given the diminished pipeline of applications to pharmacy programs. Her future students would be deprived of her mentorship, and her current and future colleagues would be bereft of her support. The academy would be losing an energetic and innovative pharmacy practice faculty member. I was happy for the professional ventures that awaited my colleague, yet disappointed that academia was an expedient disillusionment. I remember asking myself, “could this spiral have been prevented with the “right” mentorship, better communication, or some other ineffable factor?”

Pharmacy faculty leave the academy for a variety of reasons. Turnover statistics only tell part of the story. The experience of leaving the academy can be one of loss: leaving behind an aspect of professional identity. Watching numerous colleagues make similar moves is saddening as pharmacy programs invariably lose talented educators. The profession of pharmacy must value these former faculty as the educators they continue to be, and for the skillset they continue to develop. Former faculty who transition away from academia should be valued by their new working environments and the profession writ large. There is an uncomfortable silence on the diaspora of former pharmacy faculty. How can we ensure when pharmacy faculty leave academia that the profession itself retains the educator? Turnover is often framed as an organizational phenomenon to be entirely avoided, as it is costly, carries stigma, and can degrade morale. What if we reframe leaving academia as not merely a turnover statistic, but rather a conceptualization of an educator expanding relationships?

Such reframing as interconnectedness and relationality can be anchored in the idea of knowledge as relationship. Knowledge as relationship is a central tenet in the Indigenous epistemology. Former faculty working in a new environment outside academia are not diminished as educators but rather expound on the sense of self through relationship. Both the

academy and the practice environments employing former faculty benefit from intentionally cultivating the interconnectedness of these continued educators. Specific strategies to engage former faculty in their new roles are essential for pharmacy academia to flourish and benefit healthcare organizations that employ these talented educators.

Commentary

After nearly six years, I, too, moved on from my role as a pharmacy practice faculty member in academia. I am fortunate to be able to practice my craft through pharmacy education leadership at an academic medical center. I can retain some sense of my professional identity as a former faculty member through my role as an education leader, even though I am no longer a traditional academic pharmacist. I deeply identify as an educator and have a strong sense of accountability to all learners. In the ensuing years between my colleague sharing her decision to leave the academy and my own departure from university life, I have seen what appears to me an astounding number of colleagues make similar decisions. Each time, I still feel that familiar twinge of sadness and disappointment. While we might peruse the literature to find quantitative descriptions of this phenomenon, a contextualized experience is not there. Societal norms discourage us from talking about why we leave jobs. We are reticent on why the school or college of pharmacy (S/COP) of which we were a part was not a fruitful and lasting venture for us. We will say aloud that it was the right choice for our families or another external force, and perhaps that is a component of the truth. Whatever the driver, elucidated or not, there is a certain ‘leaving behind.’ What we leave behind is significant and challenging to grieve.¹

As former faculty engage in new practice settings, interconnectedness is a way to forge a path towards new opportunities. The focus becomes expanding on the skillset from the former faculty role, which necessitates creativity from the perspective of the academy and the practice setting. We must reframe academia’s regard for former faculty and how practice settings incorporate the unique educator skillset in their setting. This commentary offers learning from the experience to others who consider joining, leaving, or have already left the academy. This reflection is also a way to share experiences with those in positions of influence, both within the academy and at practice settings, who can positively impact current and former faculty in the pharmacy profession.

Epistemology refers to that which is considered knowledge. An Indigenous epistemology holds that knowledge is relationship-

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based. It presents a focus on the “relationship between things, rather than on the things themselves.”² Wilson describes the importance of the relationship with an object or an idea as greater than the noun itself.² For example, there is no way to express the word “grandmother” without a possessive pronoun in Cree: “When I have asked people how to say grandmother, the response was, ‘You can’t be a grandmother without being attached to something.’”² While a former faculty member might not physically practice the craft in a S/COP, the individual can act as an educator through a continued relationship with the profession and with learners. The concepts of the relational nature of knowledge, relationality, relational accountability, and research as reconciliation are offered as ways to reframe pharmacy faculty academic departures into opportunities for expounding on the skills of educators.²

A challenging aspect of departure from pharmacy academia is the perceived lost connection with students. An Indigenous epistemology would suggest an educator is defined as the relationship with the learner. While preceptorship is a wonderful avenue for pharmacists to continually engage with students, it is a distinct experience from serving as a full-time faculty member and preceptor in a S/COP. At the S/COP, classroom interaction occurs earlier in the program, presents an opportunity to share knowledge through relationship over the course of several months or years throughout the didactic curriculum, and provides a familiar spatial domain of the educational institutional environment. By the time a faculty member has a student on an experiential rotation, there is a high likelihood of previous classroom interaction and, therefore, knowledge shared through relationship. This is a tremendously distinct starting point of rapport in contrast to an external preceptor and student meeting for the first time on a rotation of a few weeks duration. Former pharmacy faculty, through an understanding of knowledge as relationship, are able to serve as preceptors who expeditiously build rapport with pharmacy students. Former faculty understand the academic ethos in which the student is engaged. A preceptor who has served as a former faculty member shares the institutional memory of the inner workings of the academy and can use this relational knowledge to connect with and relate to students. A solidarity is present through shared understandings, which fosters interconnectedness and relationships.

The identity as educator is reformed in these relationships. Leaving behind an education setting can feel like a detachment or severing of the relationship between educator and learners past, present, and future. The subsequent loss of professional identity is understood through the loss in relationship. Regaining this relationship is a way towards restoring this identity, even if in a different environment. In the new setting, former faculty can seek education opportunities that provide for these relationships, and health system leadership would do

well to see the presence of these educators as a key resource for their educational endeavors.

Implications

The Indigenous concept of relational accountability implies we are accountable to each other. Relational accountability is a way to learn from each other. Central to this is respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.^{2,3} The academy should work with former faculty as the educators that we are. We are all teachers, and we all have relational accountability to learners and each other. I feel a sense of relational accountability to those I see leave the academy. It is for them I share my experiences here in the hopes that they can feel understood through our relationship. Though we may never meet, I hope this shared experience provides a sense of unity for those that need to also reflect through a transition away from academia. I feel this sense of relational accountability to students I had and will not have. Though I may never meet these students, I hold an ethic of care for them.³ I encourage pharmacy students and residents to seriously consider a career in academic pharmacy. And while I have less opportunity to engage with S/COP pharmacy faculty now, I greatly respect their commitment to students and dedication to education.

I still think about the many colleagues I saw leave various S/COPs. I wonder if we could have communicated more frankly with our chairs and deans, that the impact of the factors that drove us away would have been lessened. I can only think of the junior faculty early in their ventures, with the expectations and hopes they have on faculty life. I would want them to find fulfillment in their practice. I can think of department chairs who may struggle with effective strategies to develop and mentor early and mid-career faculty so they stay invested in the academy.⁴ I would want these chairs to advocate for their faculty and to showcase consistent integrity.⁵ And I can think of senior academic leaders in pharmacy who are farther removed from the quotidian challenges faced by faculty. I would want them to exercise their substantial influence in fostering collaboration and listening to their stakeholders.⁶ Relational accountability would suggest these are minimum expectations. Relational accountability would also imply I, too, am now accountable to my relationships as an education leader. While I learn through reflective practice that my educator identity in relationship sunsets in its form of direct connection with students, I start to see that educator identity in others in my organization. This is especially intriguing when they may not see it in themselves. I see it when a residency program director gives an empathetic and encouraging smile to their resident after a tough day. I see it when a mentor and a resident share a laugh before the latter gives their big presentation of the year. And I see it when a pharmacist receives the accolade of being a great teacher, and notes it is a sentiment uncommonly heard.

The Indigenous research paradigm has been described as a form of reconciliation.⁷ Reconciliation can help to restore

relational harmony. Through reflective practice, those that have left the academy can restore and expound upon the relationship with the self as an educator. Former faculty can restore any lost sense of professional identity through reframing the career transition and acting as an educator. S/COPs that see faculty leave can engage former faculty in their new roles. Health systems and academic pharmacy can build stronger mutual engagement, through the strengths offered by former faculty. This leverages the academic background of former faculty who can navigate the borders of health system practices and pharmacy education.⁸

Honest discussion of why faculty leave pharmacy academia can help the academy retain and grow the talent needed to provide student-centered education. Leaving academia is not treason, nor a failure, but rather an opportunity and a transition. One of the most motivating factors for faculty who stay in academia is the relationship with students.⁹ Those who have left formal faculty roles are still educators and can have the benefit of a relationship with learners. Why would S/COPs not work with former faculty and their new practice settings for the benefit of the full profession? The academy and pharmacy education will be stronger when it embraces us as continued educators.

Opportunities for Action

Healthcare organizations that hire former pharmacy faculty can develop opportunities for these professionals that benefit the organization and the profession. Simultaneously, offering the ability of former faculty to continue to serve as educators, especially through relationship-building, may further enhance the satisfaction of the individual in the new role, ensuring that the sense of loss in professional identity is minimized. A faculty liaison role to support experiential education opportunities at the healthcare organization is a pathway to foster collaboration and successful relationship between the organization and S/COPs. Such a position can enhance the opportunities for students while ensuring pharmacists at the organization not affiliated with the school understand the needs of students on experiential education rotations.¹⁰ Another potential method to continue to foster the educator role of former faculty is to develop and elaborate preceptor development opportunities with the perspectives and leadership of these individuals. Having close connections with pharmacy academia, former faculty are best equipped to understand the landscape of higher education and pharmacy education and can provide a perspective that may be missing from existing development opportunities. Further, if the organization is able to offer didactic teaching opportunities to pharmacists, leadership can explore opportunities for pharmacology teaching for former pharmacy faculty. While such opportunities may traditionally be reserved for physicians or physician scientists, former pharmacy faculty have both the content knowledge and teaching experience to serve in this advanced instructional capacity. Finally, healthcare organizations, such as academic medical centers, that offer opportunities for academic

appointment can review their policies to ensure they acknowledge the efforts of former pharmacy faculty and do not solely rely on quantitative accomplishments such as scholarly output. This includes valuing the efforts of substantive course development, instruction, and assessment, in addition to student advising and university and college service.

From the perspective of the S/COPs, mentor-mentee relationships can look beyond pairing only existing faculty from the institutions. As more senior faculty leave pharmacy academia,⁹ the benefits of such mentorship will be lost if S/COPs are unable to develop ways to ensure junior faculty can develop relationships with former faculty. In addition, as a commonly cited reason for academia departure often involves underwhelming senior leadership,⁹ S/COPs need to continually examine their processes for selecting these leaders and for their continued development.¹¹ The skills necessary for success as a faculty member are not always synonymous with those required for excellence in educational leadership, and assumptions of translatability of such skills is inimical to both the institution, the leader, and the faculty.

Conclusions

A recent study on pharmacy faculty turnover surveyed faculty who left or are considering leaving the academy.⁹ Interestingly, unlike previous scholarship, this study revealed most of those faculty are associate or full professors. This indicates that increasing numbers of more senior faculty may leave the academy and rejoin pharmacy practice environments outside S/COPs. It is more prudent than ever before that S/COPs learn to value these educators, even if they walk beyond the doors of the ivory tower.

An extraordinary opportunity is upon us through the potential for enhanced collaboration between pharmacy academia and the profession writ large. Former faculty can help with the connections and communications between the S/COPs and healthcare organizations.⁸ Further, former faculty can advocate for the student experience as these practitioners will understand and empathize with the current challenges faced by the pharmacy student body of today. Increased collaboration between academia and the health system benefits all, especially in the shared interests of pharmacy student recruitment, retention, and professional development of pharmacy learners. The Indigenous concept of relational accountability means we learn from each other through respectful engagement. Mentor-mentee relationships between faculty, education leaders, and preceptors in the academy and profession in all areas can enhance the engagement of pharmacy educators. This can foster the relationality amongst the arms of the pharmacy profession, and, seeing knowledge as relationships in an Indigenous epistemology, we grow our collective knowledge as practitioners and educators.

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