

Introduction: The Route Ahead

“Build a network. When I was a new pharmacist, I wish someone had advised me to go out and meet doctors and nurses in the community—so you’re not just a voice on the phone, but a professional they know and trust.”

—Jean-Venable
“Kelly” R. Goode,
professor and
director, Community
Pharmacy Practice
and Residency
Program, School of
Pharmacy,
Virginia
Commonwealth
University

When looking back on the five-plus years that have passed since I completed pharmacy school, I realize I was in no way prepared for my integration into the profession of pharmacy. My school, professors, preceptors, mentors, fellow students, and family all did their absolute best to make sure my transition was smooth, and I’m eternally grateful. But now that I’m a preceptor myself, I know that some things cannot be taught in a classroom or on a rotation.

I think I was most unprepared for the independence and personal accountability that come with the “real world” of practicing pharmacy. Let’s face it; most of us accepted into pharmacy school were among the best of our undergraduate classes and tops in our high school coursework. We were expected to do well, get good grades, and make those who care about us proud. Evaluation and feedback were important parts of the learning process and there was a definitive end to each class, project, assignment, or school term.

In the first few years of my career, it felt strange that no one tested or evaluated me on a regular basis. Each month led to the next without clear-cut separation, and my boss conducted a performance review only once a year. I had to evaluate myself, ask for feedback when I needed it, and set my own goals and guidelines. I was now in charge of my career and where to go next. I hadn’t understood how much everything in my world would change as I transitioned from student to pharmacist. I wish I’d sought more guidance about how to adapt and excel in my new surroundings.

Although it’s unlikely that a book can truly get you ready to enter the profession, I hope the tips, advice, and resources on the coming pages will help ease your way through the

first few years. Take a minute to read the questions that Laurie Whalin, a student pharmacist, poses in Box 1-1. Have you wondered the same things? This book should answer many of your questions.

Knowing It All

I chose the profession of pharmacy because it's so diverse, giving me the ability to work in research, patient care, management, or academia. Yet pharmacy's wonderful variety also makes it difficult to prepare student pharmacists for what awaits on the other side of graduation. Your future might involve taking care of patients—at a pharmacy counter or by the bedside—or it might look more like a desk job, for example. Your school gave you an excellent foundation for these roles, but each option requires different skill sets. There is no way you will know everything you need by the time you receive your diploma.

You've been introduced to the key information and skills, but you haven't mastered them all. This is normal—and you'll cope by filling gaps in your knowledge base when they arise. Sometimes the remedy might be as simple as looking up the answer to a drug-related question in *Goodman and Gilman's* or as complex as seeking additional training. Gaps in your knowledge base do not make you an inadequate health care professional—they make you human—and it's important to recognize that sometimes you won't have all the information you need.

Does this mean you can give yourself permission to remain static rather than staying on top of new information and skills? Absolutely not. Continuous professional development is an integral part of being a pharmacist. It's your responsibility to supplement and expand your knowledge throughout your career.

Where to Focus?

Students ask, "Are there certain subjects I should focus on more than others?" The answer really depends on how much you know about what awaits you on the other side of graduation. For example, if you already plan to work in your family's pharmacy business and eventually take it over, you can certainly concentrate on subjects that will better prepare you for that task. If you've known for a long time that you want to work "at the bench top" doing research, you might need different courses and experience to get ready. Advisors, mentors, and preceptors within your school or community can help you tailor your elective coursework and rotations to your needs.

You may be thinking, "But what about those of us who don't know what we want to do?" Well, that's probably the perspective I know best—because I had no idea, other

than that I wanted to use my knowledge of medicine to make a difference in my community. Many different career paths could fit that description.

I chose pharmacy because I want to work in health care, because nursing and medicine didn't seem right for me, and because I preferred having many different options for specialization. I decided to try on as many hats as I could during my time as a student pharmacist to see which one fit the best.

It's okay for you to tell friends, family, professors, preceptors, and colleagues that you just aren't sure yet which career "hat" is the right fit—as long as you're still trying them on. As discussed further in Chapter 3, don't choose what you think is pleasing to your mentors. Your path in pharmacy is up to you. You have many ways to get a taste of various roles before you make a long-term commitment.

Tools to Build, Skills to Develop

As you transition into the world of professional pharmacy, some things are applicable to everyone, regardless of your career path—such as developing your interviewing skills, deciding whether to seek advanced training and choosing the right program for you, and building an effective résumé, curriculum vitae, and portfolio. Chapters 4 and 5 provide advice on these matters and refer you to helpful resources.

I remember that, for me, one of the hardest things about creating my résumé was looking objectively at my achievements and figuring out how to highlight them. I felt as if I hadn't proven myself yet—but actually, by the time we graduate, we've already had successes we can tout, such as projects we've initiated, presentations we've given, and contributions we've made during internships and rotations. We have to sort through our long list of activities and pull out the ones that speak loudest about our strengths so we can sell ourselves effectively.

I'm sure you know you need a résumé or CV, but you probably haven't thought about many other areas this book covers, such how to develop your leadership and communication skills, strategies for adjusting to the workplace, and ways to cope with being the new kid on the block. The latter chapters in the book cover these topics.

When I was a student, I didn't realize the huge role that communication skills play in the workplace. Being able to interact successfully, get your message across, and listen to others is crucial to career success, no matter whether you spend more time with patients or with other health care professionals. Trust me—even if your written and oral communication skills are above average, there are aspects of interpersonal communication you can and must continue to develop.

I'll never forget the first time I had to give a major presentation to hospital administrators. On the surface, this task may seem easy if you've given presentations in school before. It was different, though, because my audience was not pharmacists, professors, or students—it was executives. These very intelligent people had a limited knowledge of pharmacy practice. I had to figure out how to offer enough information to get my point across without inundating them—and without giving the impression that I thought my audience wasn't smart. I'd never had to adjust details and delivery in this way before. The stakes were very high. The presentation was worth much more than a grade in a class; it determined whether I could begin a big project that was really important to me.

Leadership skills are crucial in health care, whether you choose a management position or not. At some point in your new career, in some capacity, you'll find yourself directing or guiding others. And you'll draw on leadership skills daily even if you simply work alongside pharmacy technicians and other support staff.

Adjusting to your new schedule is another key learning task. Once you enter practice, you'll find it's very different from what you've experienced so far, even during rotations. You may consider yourself a pro at balancing the personal and professional aspects of student life; even so, sometimes you'll struggle to fit everything in when you're in the workplace full time. It's something I grapple with constantly as a practitioner, preceptor, manager, committee member, and even as a daughter, sister, friend, and wife.

You'll no longer have the immediate support of professors, preceptors, and classmates that you've been accustomed to. You'll have advisors, mentors, and colleagues to turn to for professional and personal advice, but first you'll need to build a network of resources. If you don't think about this issue ahead of time, support may not be there when you need it.

There isn't one "right" way to assimilate into your new work environment or ensure your success in pharmacy. But there are many things you must do to move ahead in a positive way. The transformation from student to professional pharmacist is rarely smooth or easy. You'll encounter bumps along the route, your expectations will change, and many times you'll have to look deep inside yourself. It's all part of the growing process. The pointers in this book, the people in your network, and the knowledge and skills you established in pharmacy school will help launch you toward your life as a productive and respected pharmacist.

Box 1-1**School vs. the Real World – The Student Perspective****by Laurie M. Whalin**

As we sit in class, study for exams, prepare projects, and participate in student professional organizations, it can be hard to think of the day when we'll no longer be consumed with student life. But the time when we will be practicing pharmacists is much closer than we think.

As I write this, I'm in my last year of pharmacy school completing my final experiential rotations. For a long time, the idea of being an *actual* pharmacist seemed as far from reality as winning the lottery. But now that graduation is near, I keep wondering, "How do I make the transition from school to the real world? How do I change from student to new practitioner?"

I have so many questions. How much information that I study for each exam will I use in practice each day? I'm fixated on the details so I perform well on exams, but I don't know if that's appropriate or even feasible for a busy pharmacist. With so many drugs, interactions, and side effects to be aware of, is it important to memorize details? Or should I acquire a baseline working knowledge—and then know where to look for more information?

During school we're inundated with an overwhelming amount of material. We find ourselves cramming, only to forget the information as we move on to the next subject, concept, or exam. What does this mean for our future? Will we be adequately prepared?

In discussions with my classmates, many concerns come up. How can you tailor your learning to one setting when the pharmacy profession has so many options to choose from? If you know you want to practice in a community pharmacy, should you focus more on some subjects than others? The information we are learning is crucial to our careers and the welfare of our future patients—but what is the best way to reinforce these vital concepts? Will we ever really be able to apply the knowledge we gained during pharmacy school in a real-life practice setting?

While dwelling in the pharmacy school "bubble," we're told what to learn, by when, and how. Yet the minute we receive our diplomas and step into the world, no one will be holding our hands. It will be up to us to figure out how to stay abreast of everything. With new drug approvals and fresh information from clinical trials coming in almost daily, how will we stay up to date while handling all the responsibilities of a practicing

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Box 1-1*continued*

pharmacist? And once we've sorted through the information, how do we apply it to our practice and our patients?

The professors, researchers, clinical specialists, and other experts who surround us while we're in pharmacy school typically have an "open door" policy, allowing pharmacy students to stop in anytime we need advice. After graduation, when that door closes, who can we turn to when we have questions? Having developed my basic pharmacy skills in a supportive environment, I wonder how to handle having less personal support. I'll be transitioning to a situation that isn't student-centered, in which my needs and growth are no longer the focus. The organization and the patients will be the priority.

What about the concept of "professionalism"? Is it the same in the working world as it is in school? And how do we change our routines from finishing class in the early afternoon and cramming at night, changing classes every hour and switching courses every six months, to a structured workplace—40 hours a week in the same location with the same people? How do we keep our day-to-day professional activities interesting? How do we handle our shortcomings, mistakes, and failures—which are bound to happen?

In pharmacy school, poor performance on an exam or project only affects ourselves, but in a practice setting, mistakes can have consequences for colleagues or patients. In school, we might choose to sacrifice an A on a quiz to go out with friends one night, but in our careers, A-level work will be required all the time. How do we learn to have fun without compromising our success? How do we balance personal and professional priorities?

I still don't know many of the answers, even though I'll graduate soon. This book should help new practitioners like me—and you—transition from school to the real world.

—Laurie M. Whalin earned her PharmD in 2009 from Campbell University School of Pharmacy.