

Administrative Degree Options Outside Pharmacy for Pharmacists Interested in Administrative Careers in the Health Care Field

Joseph L. Fink III*

Abstract — A variety of challenges facing the health care system in general and the profession of pharmacy in particular creates a need for pharmacists who have completed advanced education and training in administration. Some may choose to look outside academic pharmacy for graduate degree programs in administration.

Four types of administrative degrees — MBA, MHA, MPA, and MPH — are described. A list of factors to be considered by a person thinking about pursuing graduate education in this area is presented and discussed. The admission process is described as it may typically occur for such programs in order to familiarize pharmacists with what criteria are likely to be used.

An informed evaluation of the alternatives available will help students select the program best suited to their career goals.

Key Words — administration; education; advanced degree programs

Hosp Pharm — 2007;42:626-630

One can pick up a newspaper or turn on a television set on nearly any given day and learn about a problem or challenge facing the US health care delivery system or its components, personnel, or institutions. Financial developments or health system challenges may predominate on 1 day while ethical or legal issues will come to the fore on another.

The fact that the health care system is of multibillion dollar dimensions and accounts for well over 10% of the gross domestic economy has heightened the awareness of both the public at

large and public policy makers. Moreover, the fact is that despite truly wonderful technological advances, many in our society are still encountering difficulty in gaining access to the system and its abilities to address their maladies.

Some touted managed care as the panacea for all ills that beset the system, forecasting that merely by applying sound management principles to the system and its components increased efficiency and, therefore, economies would be obtained. However, others argued back that the health care system has unique attributes that

make application of management approaches used in business settings inappropriate. As it turns out, managed care principles and approaches have worked well in some arenas and not so well in others.

The health reform movement of the early and mid 1990s, both at the federal and state levels, sought to restructure the system to improve access and create economies. At the national level, the initiative sputtered and failed. Several states had significant legislative and administrative or regulatory initiatives in this area that may have long-term efficacy.

Pharmacists and pharmacy have not escaped the scrutiny both inside and outside the health care system as they continue to look for ways to bring the behemoth under control. In fact, because prescriptions continue to represent an out-of-pocket expenditure for many patients—even for those with prescription drug insurance, the copayments or deductibles continue to escalate and exclusions from coverage abound. Heightened awareness of prescription drug prices has led to increased calls for bringing those costs under control. This is true, despite the fact that expenditures for prescriptions and related services continue to consti-

*Joseph L. Fink III, BSP Pharm, JD, FAPhA, Professor of Pharmacy Law and Policy, College of Pharmacy, Professor of Health Services Management, College of Public Health, and Professor of Health Administration, Martin School of Public Policy and Administration, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky.

tute less than 15% of health care costs in the country.

CREATIVE ADMINISTRATORS NEEDED

The challenges facing the system, as well as the profession, require creative solutions. These solutions will most likely come from those who have studied the problems within the system and possess the administrative, managerial, and leadership skills to effect positive change. Having leaders who are sensitive to the unique challenges and opportunities in pharmacy and who also have honed their administrative skills can position the profession well to address critical issues both internal to the profession and from external sources.

Pharmacists who want to expand their administrative responsibilities may find that having an advanced degree in management or administration is quite helpful. In fact, an advanced degree for someone who already has a degree in pharmacy would be viewed as more valuable than, say, returning for additional undergraduate course work in management. Nearly 30 years ago, The Study Commission on Pharmacy, also known as The Millis Commission, noted that a component of education of the pharmacist is:

The mastery of additional knowledge and the acquisition of the additional skills needed for those differentiated roles (in pharmacy), which require additional knowledge and skill *other than pharmacy*. [emphasis in original]¹

A number of advanced degree programs outside of pharmacy having an administrative focus are available to pharmacists who aspire to increase their abilities in management. Among the most widely available are:

- MBA — Master of Business Administration
- MHA — Master of Health Administration
- MPA — Master of Public Administration
- MPH — Master of Public Health

These programs would be in addition to traditional MS degree programs in hospital pharmacy administration or pharmacy administration offered within the rubric of academic pharmacy. Such advanced degree programs in pharmacy offer opportunities for specialization and creation of deeper expertise within the profession. The degree programs to be discussed here are typically offered in academic units other than a college or school of pharmacy and may provide the student an opportunity to gain an appreciation for the broader context for pharmaceutical services within the health care system.

What are the differences among these offerings and what factors should one evaluate when considering advanced education in administration?

MISSION AND GOALS OF THE PROGRAMS

Each of these degree programs has a slightly different focus. Even within a specialty (eg, all MBA degree programs) some programs emphasize one area over another (ie, finance over marketing, management over accounting). The variety of programs and details within them is a strength of the US system of higher education. At the same time, it renders a comparison of specific programs more challenging.

MBA: This program of management, originally designed to provide engineers with management skills, now exposes students

from a variety of majors to a mix of management courses, with some programs offering substantial flexibility during the second year to specialize through selection of electives.

MHA: This program mission is to prepare health service administrators who effectively manage complex problems in a variety of health care settings.

MPA: This program is designed to prepare students for careers as policy analysts, managers, and leaders in public and nonprofit service.

MPH: This program provides a broad overview of the disciplines of public health and the basic principles of public health practice. Through concentration in one of five tracks, one of which is health services management, the student builds skills and knowledge to establish or enhance a career in public health.

FACTORS TO EVALUATE ABOUT A PROGRAM

Faculty Resources

Does the program draw on faculty from a variety of departments and programs across campus? How actively does the program incorporate part-time or adjunct faculty who are active professional practitioners in the field of administration on a daily basis? Sometimes adjunct or part-time faculty can enliven class discussion with issues of pressing importance in their institutions, illustrating theories or concepts with real-life examples.

Curriculum

Of the credit hours to be completed to earn the degree, how many are in required versus elective courses? Does the program offer a variety of electives of interest to you? Are the electives consist-

tent with your career goals? Would the allocation of time for elective courses enable one to pursue a specialty or focus within the curriculum, as opposed to a lock-step or one-size-fits-all approach? Does the program require a capstone project or a practicum placement where a project is completed?

Course and Program Prerequisites

When evaluating a program, one should closely examine information about prerequisites. For example, some MBA degree programs expect the entering student to have completed basic accounting and economics courses before enrolling, so for comparison purposes the credits associated with those courses, probably at least 12 semester credit hours in total for both sequences, should be added to the number of credits needed to earn the graduate degree.

Program Types or Formats

Over the past 50 years or so, institutions of higher education have become increasingly responsive to the needs of students for flexibility in scheduling and working with students to accommodate their work lives, recognizing that not all outstanding students can attend classes on a full-time basis.

Full-time: Students are enrolled with a full-time credit load, which for graduate programs is usually defined as nine semester credit hours per semester (in contrast with undergraduate work where 12 hours is considered full-time).

Part-time: Students are enrolled for a reduced credit load.

Dual Degree: Students complete the requirements for two degrees simultaneously, such as a PharmD student concurrently enrolled in an MBA degree program, where the business courses

are counted as electives for purposes of the pharmacy degree.

Executive Programs: Students are typically working executives or practitioners attending on a schedule emphasizing weekend or other periodic class sessions with extensive assignments between gatherings. Sometimes such students are being sponsored by their firms to complete the degree for advancement.

Distance Learning: Students and faculty work from remote locations, interacting without being in the same place. Some students respond well to such a method of instruction while others do not do well with this highly self-paced approach, preferring instead the structure of scheduled classroom sessions.

Reduced opportunities for interaction with faculty and other students are also viewed by some as a drawback to distance education.

A more complete set of descriptions of program formats as well as advantages and disadvantages of each is available at <http://www.mba.com> under the heading "Find Your Program," then go to "Tools to Help You Choose a Program Type."

Program Accreditation

As with a pharmacy degree program, accreditation can be very important, both at the institutional and programmatic levels. The process serves the important role of enabling program faculty and leaders to periodically benchmark their efforts against those of parallel programs. It also serves to bring some degree of uniformity to programmatic offerings without overly stifling educational innovation and experimentation. Appropriate accreditation provides assurance that the program has been inde-

pendently evaluated, meets acceptable standards, and facilitates mobility for graduates.

When evaluating a degree program, one should ask two questions regarding accreditation. First, is the parent institution accredited by the appropriate regional higher education accrediting agency (eg, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools)? Next, is the specific degree program accredited by the relevant national agency (see discussion below under "Program Parameters")? In order for accreditation to be effective, the accrediting agency must be recognized by the US Department of Education through its accreditation agency recognition program.

Accreditation may also be important if the student is employed and is seeking to take advantage of a fringe benefit of employment that covers the educational expenses. Frequently, employers' policies will require that the employee/student be enrolled in an accredited program in order to be eligible for tuition reimbursement. In addition, there may be an additional expectation from the employer to qualify for reimbursement in the form of a minimum grade point average (GPA) requirement (eg, must earn at least a 3.25 GPA).

Program Parameters

A potential student seeking to compare the alternatives may find the process facilitated by listing a number of critical pieces of information for each degree option, such as the typical number of semester credit hours required for the degree, the name of the relevant accrediting agency and its Web site, and whether the degree typically requires a thesis, a cap-

stone experience, paper and presentation, or a comprehensive final examination. An example of this would be:

MBA: 36 semester hour credits minimum

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business
<http://www.aacsb.edu>

Comprehensive final examination

MHA: 44 semester hour credits minimum

Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education

<http://www.cahmeweb.org>

Capstone experience and presentation

MPA: 45 semester hour credits minimum

National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration

<http://www.naspa.org>

Capstone experience and presentation

MPH: 42 semester credit hours minimum

Council on Education for Public Health

<http://www.ceph.org>

Capstone experience and presentation

Admission of Students

The author's experience with students in the MHA degree program for over 20 years has led him to conclude that students in that degree program have fallen into three categories:

- Health professionals who would like an administrative degree to complement their professional background, perhaps to move into an administrative role rather than a practitioner role
- Persons working in the health care system who do not have a professional degree in a health care field but who aspire to

move into higher administrative roles

- Persons not currently working in the health care system but who would like to do so, using the administrative degree to gain entry

An important question to ask is whether the program admits students only once per year, typically for the fall term, or if new students may be admitted at the beginning of each term. Being attentive to application deadlines and the specifics of exactly what credentials are to be submitted to complete the application process are always important. For example, admissions offices will usually require official transcripts of prior academic work transmitted directly from the granting institution to the university where the student is now applying for graduate work.

Applicants should secure an application for admission. Most programs typically have applications distributed from a central admissions office in the graduate school, with application materials being returned there to be matched up with official admission test score reports, transcripts, etc. Online application processes are increasingly popular. Once complete, the applicant's file would then be referred to the degree program office for an admission decision by a Program Admission Committee or by the Director of Graduate Studies within the department.

Materials required to be submitted probably will include:

- An application for admission plus the application processing fee;
- Official transcripts from each institution of higher education attended, with most institutions requiring that those come directly from the former school;

- Official reports of Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) scores. "Official" means they go directly from the testing agency to the institution.

- Letters of reference, typically two or three.

Some programs will tend to emphasize the applicant's GPA across prior academic work and rigor of the curriculum completed, while others will direct more attention to nationally standardized admission test scores. Admission committees increasingly are looking for applicants with significant work experience who will enrich the classroom discussion. Significant participation in extracurricular or professional activities and community service activities, especially in leadership roles, may also strengthen one's application.

It may also be possible to commence study at the graduate level without being admitted to a specific degree program. This approach might be recommended to those who are contemplating pursuing the degree, but who want to get a limited experience first, perhaps because they have been away from the classroom for awhile. Postbaccalaureate students are those who hold an undergraduate degree and who wish to pursue graduate study without a degree objective initially. That category may also accommodate students who do not fulfill all the entrance requirements of the graduate school. Typically, such students may take courses for graduate credit and the credit, thus earned, may later be applied to fulfill the requirements for a graduate degree. Some programs view this as a way for a student to validate his or her potential for graduate study, using the grades earned during postbaccalaureate status as a

key factor in a later admission decision. It should be noted that graduate schools often limit the number of credits that can be transferred from another institution to be applied toward degree requirements at a new institution to a maximum of nine semester hours.

One challenge some pharmacists may face is the interpretation that a graduate of a PharmD degree program who did not complete a baccalaureate degree in addition to the pharmacy work lacks an undergraduate degree and, as a result, is not eligible for graduate admission. Typically such an interpretation is made by a clerk in the Office of Graduate Admissions whose job assignment is to screen applications against pre-established criteria. If the issue can be taken up with an associate dean or dean of the graduate school, it is likely that he or she will promptly recognize that the credit hours earned by one holding an entry level professional doctorate in pharmacy greatly exceeds the number of credits required to earn an undergraduate degree. This should overcome the objection about lack of an undergraduate degree.

Availability of Financial Aid

Generally speaking, graduate degree programs of the types addressed here have very limited scholarship resources to support students, and those that do exist are typically reserved for full-time students. Some graduate degree programs, mostly at the PhD level, offer assistantships to students to recruit them to the program, either as a teaching assistant or a research assistant. However, these are generally reserved for outstanding students who will be enrolled on a

full-time basis who have had an adequate prior background to qualify them to serve in the teaching or research role.

Admission Tests

The GRE measures skills related to verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing abilities.² That is fairly similar to the GMAT, which is described as “a standardized test designed to measure basic verbal, mathematical, and analytical writing skills that have been developed over a long period of time through education and work.”³

The Graduate Management Admissions Council (<http://www.mba.com>) offers free downloadable GMAT preparation software. Some colleges and universities offer GMAT or GRE review sessions. Self-preparation can be facilitated by use of various commercially available books and CD-ROM products. Commercial test preparation courses, such as those offered by Kaplan Test Preparation, have also proven helpful to some.

Which Program is Best?

It is difficult to project which of the four degree options would be best for a particular pharmacist or a preferred career path. One reason for this is that a hospital director who holds an MBA degree, for example, may unduly favor those with a similar background. Alternatively, that same administrator may think that he or she has the MBA perspective covered and, as a result, would prefer to hire someone with a different background. The purpose of the discussion of alternatives here is to position the pharmacist to make a more informed decision, not to make the decision for that individual.

To some extent, a degree program selection may be influenced heavily by what programs are offered in proximity to the pharmacist's location; scheduling considerations may also carry great weight.

CONCLUSION

Pharmacists seeking to move into administrative roles or those already in such roles who would like to improve their prospects for further administrative advancement, either within pharmacy-related areas or within health care institutions or systems in general, may wish to investigate the possibilities associated with the various administrative degrees offered at the graduate level. By reviewing the information available about the programmatic alternatives and making an informed decision, potential graduate students can select the program best suited to their career goals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author discloses that he is employed by an educational institution that offers all the academic degree programs discussed in this paper. Moreover, he holds a faculty appointment in units at University of Kentucky offering three of the four degree offerings discussed.

REFERENCES

1. Millis JS. *Pharmacists for the Future: The Report of the Study Commission on Pharmacy*. Ann Arbor, Mich: Health Administration Press; 1975.
2. Educational Testing Service. Test content: what skills does the general test measure? Available at: <http://www.gre.org/faqnew.html>. Accessed April 27, 2007.
3. Graduate Management Admission Council. What the GMAT measures. Available at: <http://www.gmac.com/gmac>. Accessed April 27, 2007. ■