

Chapter 3

Thriving in the Post– Pandemic Classroom: Promoting Engagement in Health Professions' Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on promoting student engagement in health profession education. Discussions will include the longstanding issues related to student engagement that were evident before the COVID-19 pandemic, how these issues associated with engagement were magnified during the pandemic, and how these issues have been transformed into new opportunities to enhance student engagement as we collectively enter the post-pandemic era. Elements of wellbeing, resiliency, and motivation, as they relate to engagement, are explored in depth. Strategies to promote student engagement in the future classroom are discussed in addition to considerations for stronger faculty engagement surrounding teaching. Throughout the chapter, the experiences of one school of pharmacy will be described, providing examples of strategies for enhancing engagement in the post-pandemic classroom.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7623-6.ch003

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning in the midst of a pandemic offers a myriad of unique challenges as well as opportunities for schools, faculty, and students. Though coping with change can be challenging, the unexpected disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic forced classrooms to alter operations in an extremely condensed period of time. This necessitated acceptance and adaptation of a number of challenges, including requiring quick adjustments to a new virtual learning environment. Coupled with this disruption is a unique opportunity to reframe the problem as a chance to address enduring issues and thrive in a new learning environment.

Motivating faculty to embrace innovative pedagogy in order to engage students through the density of a curriculum has been a historic dilemma that has perplexed educators, specifically health professions' educators, for decades (Pelaccia & Viau, 2016). Over the years, health professions education has adopted a variety of new strategies for more authentic instruction, including interprofessional education, integration, active learning, competency-based education and enhanced experiential exercises. However, engaging students in these experiences and encouraging them to be motivated, resilient learners has continued to plague educators, as even highly motivated students such as those in the health professions can resist learning (Tolman & Kremling, 2017). Coupling the historic challenge to engage students in the didactic curriculum with the disruption created by the COVID-19 pandemic further compounds the challenges educators face to engage learners to a significant degree.

The Background section of this chapter will focus on common, historical challenges to student engagement amongst health professions students, emphasizing motivation, wellbeing, and resiliency as mediators of engagement. While there are many theories to explain engagement, no single definition or common organization explaining student engagement exists in the literature. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, motivation, wellbeing, and resiliency represent the authors' constructs for engagement. Based on our experiences during the pandemic, these areas are the most significant and relevant ones for professional students and faculty. These identified areas, which influence engagement, will be the primary focus for this chapter.

Living through a traumatic public health crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, which took center stage in students' lives, offers opportunities for personal and professional evolution. As a result, this chapter will also highlight and consider how the educational challenges related to engagement (i.e., motivation, wellbeing, and resiliency) might be reframed as opportunities that promote solutions.

We propose the model in Figure 1 as a graphic representation of the set-up of this chapter, which is written chronologically within the context of pre-, mid-, and post-pandemic eras. The linking circles indicate the connection between the phases, yet are distinct to portray the nuances of each distinct era. 'Pre-Pandemic' refers to the established challenges health professions students and faculty have had to balance regarding their influence on engagement. Note the balance in the middle of the pre-pandemic circle. 'Mid-Pandemic' refers to the newly introduced trials of the COVID-19 pandemic, and associated viral transmission as depicted by the viral particle in the center. Finally, 'Post-Pandemic' offers insights into how these challenges, both old and new, can be transformed into opportunities, which is the key mindset to developing, maintaining, and fostering personal and academic wellbeing into the future. This is portrayed by the key in the center. Throughout the chapter, the experience of one School of Pharmacy will be discussed and used to situate possible strategies for the future.

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