



Perspectives on a Return Service Agreement Program for Pharmacy Students

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Research Article

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Abstract

Objective: This study was conducted to determine the perspectives of pharmacy students (freshmen and lateral entrants, AY 2011-2012) of the University of the Philippines Manila College of Pharmacy on the Return Service Agreement (RSA) program.

Methods: The freshmen class and all lateral entrants totaling to 102 students, were requested to voluntarily answer a questionnaire at the start of the first semester. Demographic and other quantitative data were encoded and processed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Results: A total of 94 students responded (92.16%) to the survey conducted at the start of the first semester. Almost half of the students (45.74%) answered that they chose pharmacy as a pre-medicine course. Majority of them (86.17%) responded that they will stay in the Philippines after graduation and specifically answered hospital pharmacy as their future area of practice in the country. Majority of the respondents (62.77%) were in favor of the RSA program.

Conclusion: The results showed that the RSA program was acceptable to most of the respondents. However, curricular interventions must be implemented in order for the students to fully accept their social accountability as future health professionals for the country.

Keywords: perspectives, pharmacy students, return service agreement

Introduction

The exodus of health professionals to other countries for better remuneration prompted the University of the Philippines Manila (UP Manila) to establish mechanisms on how to retain its graduates and enable them to serve the Filipinos most especially those in rural and remote communities. The most recent was the expansion of the Return Service Agreement (RSA) program to five (5) other colleges of UP Manila. The first implementers of this program were the School of Health Sciences in 1976 and the College of Medicine in 2005.

The RSA was institutionalized in line with the University's vision-mission and its mandate as a public service university. Under the expanded program, the RSA is an absolute admission requirement for all freshmen students and lateral entrants (shiftees, transferees, 2nd degree enrollees) of all the health science colleges of UP Manila starting the academic year 2011-2012. The College of Pharmacy was among the five (5) units covered by this expanded program. The Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy (BSP) and Bachelor of Science in Industrial Pharmacy (BSIP) which are both 5-year competency-based programs were specifically covered. According to the policies of the RSA, graduates of the College of Pharmacy shall serve in the Philippines for two (2) years and are expected to serve fully within five (5) years.

The graduates shall serve in accordance with the roles of a pharmacist and shall preferably be an employment with government agencies/institutions, underserved towns/provinces, non-government and cause-oriented organizations. If a graduate has not fully complied with the RSA after five (5) years, he/she will pay double the cost of his/her education at a prevailing rate from the time of entry, plus interests, and less the total amount of tuition fee paid. The computation of the cost of education, monitoring, penalties, development of a placement process and other details are specified in the implementing rules and regulations of the RSA⁽¹⁾.

There is shortage of pharmacists in the Philippines and a study of pharmacy workforce in the country revealed that there is a declining production of pharmacists due to decreasing enrolment, decreasing licensure examination passing rates and high attrition rate among pharmacy



students⁽²⁾. It is expected therefore that the RSA program implemented by the UP Manila College of Pharmacy can contribute in solving this shortage problem.

This study was conducted to determine the perspectives of pharmacy students (freshmen and lateral entrants, AY 2011-2012) of the UP Manila College of Pharmacy on the RSA program. Results of the study will serve as baseline data for future studies and guide administrators in the implementation of the program. This study could also be used as a model for other pharmacy schools planning to establish a similar program.

Methodology

The freshmen class and all lateral entrants (shiftees, transferees and 2nd degree enrollees) of the College of Pharmacy, University of the Philippines Manila totaling to 102 students for the Academic Year 2011-2012, were requested to voluntarily answer a questionnaire at the start of the first semester. The self-administered survey instrument was composed of five (5) open-ended questions that generated qualitative data on the perspectives of the students about the Return Service Agreement (RSA) program. Demographic and other quantitative data were encoded and processed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007. The qualitative data on the other hand were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Results

A total of 94 students responded (92.16%) to the survey conducted at the start of the first semester. Majority of the respondents were freshmen students (79.79%), females (74.47%) and enrolled under the BS Pharmacy program (53.19%). Majority of the students responded that they took pharmacy as a pre-medicine course (45.74%).

This was followed by the answer that pharmacy was their personal interest (39.36%). When asked about their future area of practice, 86.17% of the students responded that they will stay in the Philippines after graduation and majority of them specifically answered hospital pharmacy as their future area of practice in the country. This was followed by industrial pharmacy practice.

Majority of the respondents (62.77%) were in favor of the RSA program. Only two (2) students directly stated that they were against it. The rest did not give their opinions about the program (35.10%).

Discussion

Although the return service agreement was acceptable to the majority of the respondents and a high percentage stated that they will stay in the Philippines after

graduation, a significant portion of the surveyed population did not give their perspectives about the program. This could mean that they did not fully understand the program or they did not want to comment at all since they already signed the contract and had no choice but to comply with the obligations of the RSA.

It should also be noted that almost half of the total number of respondents said that they took pharmacy as a preparatory course for medicine. Under the RSA, enrolling for a second degree on a full-time basis such as Doctor of Medicine or other programs cannot be considered as return service. In such cases, the graduate has the option to: serve the RSA of the first course before enrolling to the second degree; pay back the computed cost of his/her education before going into the second degree; or if the second degree will also be taken in UP Manila, the required return service of the first degree will be added to the years of RSA of the second degree⁽¹⁾. Since most of the respondents have future plans of enrolling in medicine after pharmacy, the goal of producing additional pharmacists who will serve the country will be affected.

This, together with the high attrition rate among students, could complicate the RSA program of the College of Pharmacy. However, a study showed that curricular interventions can be effective tools in fostering professional attitudes and behavior even at an early stage in pharmacy education⁽³⁾. Thus, interventions such as courses or activities highlighting not just professionalism but altruism and nationalism as well, could influence the perspectives of the students regarding the RSA. Through such interventions, students should realize that the contract they signed with the University should not only be their reason for staying in the country after graduation but they should eventually embrace the pharmacy profession as their way of serving the country and its people.

Conclusion

The results showed that the RSA program of the College of Pharmacy, University of the Philippines Manila was acceptable to most of the respondents. However, curricular interventions must be implemented in order for the students to fully accept their social accountability as future health professionals for the country. Core values of altruism and nationalism must be incorporated in the subjects that these students will be taking for them to realize the true purpose of the RSA program.



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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Authors contributed equally to all aspects of the study.

PEER REVIEW

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests