



Traditional vs. Modern Pharmacy Educational and Scientific Conferences

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Abstract

Information sharing and professional development acquired by attending pharmacy conferences whether of an educational or scientific nature can be made more virtually accessible. Significant cost and time savings can be achieved by "modernizing" the experience of the first-time or even the seasoned conference attendee. Transitioning from traditional to virtual conferences should be executed in a hybrid fashion.

Keywords: Virtual; Conference; Pharmacy education; Pharmaceutical sciences; Pharmacy practice

Introduction

Dwindling enrollment in higher education has resulted in additional burdens on college and university budgets. Currently, the total national student debt burden is about \$1.3 trillion [1], so decreasing enrollments remain a cause for concern. Many new schools of pharmacy (many of which are not research-intensive) are able to provide faculty monetary compensation to attend conferences; however it is associated with a limited budget. Also, the cost of attending conferences is increasing significantly [2].

In light of this changing environment with the rapid growth of social media and technology, information sharing has reached new heights and it has become critical to discuss and explore some virtual means of accessing the same information that an academician/pharmaceutical scientist/student pharmacist is able to by attending a traditional pharmacy educational/scientific conference.

Exploring alternatives to traditional conferences would result in significant cost and time savings for the conference attendee and enhance the overall goal of sharing research findings in a timely and efficient manner. Pharmacy because of its diverse nature and consequently a number of diverse conferences would be uniquely positioned for championing such changes.

Perspective or Commentary

One of the main and most popular sessions at educational or scientific conferences is the poster sessions. Digital posters are gradually replacing traditional paper posters at many educational and scientific conferences. One such organization is the AAPS (American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists) which recently transitioned to all digital poster formats for poster presentations at their annual meetings. The conference has full HD TV terminals set up with digital poster presentations every hour. In addition there are "table top terminals" set up for viewing posters at a time that is permitted by the conference attendee's individual schedule [3]. This reduces the inconvenience caused by having to carry a paper poster when travelling. Moreover, it significantly reduces the burden associated with printing costs and having to purchase printers designed to print posters at educational institutions, especially at smaller colleges. Other organizations such as the ACCP (American College of Clinical Pharmacy) have been holding Virtual Poster Symposium sessions since 2012 [4].

Virtual conferences would also eliminate the need for travel and result in cost and time savings. Pharmacy faculty often have busy teaching schedules and are occasionally unable to attend conferences, since their presence is required in large introductory class and lab sessions. This is especially true for attendance at conferences that take place during regular fall and spring semesters. In lieu of longer 3 or 4 day conferences, shorter day long local events involving local discussion groups could be planned. The venues could be local schools of pharmacy on a revolving basis. This would ensure that not all in person interaction and networking is eliminated as would be expected

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Received Date: 22 Apr 2017

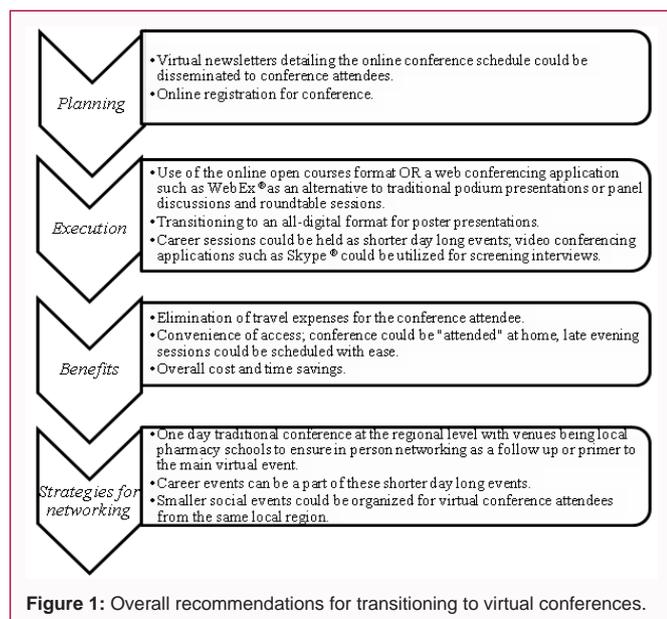
Accepted Date: 16 Jun 2017

Published Date: 23 Jun 2017

Citation:

Chinwala MG. Traditional vs. Modern Pharmacy Educational and Scientific Conferences. *Ann Pharmacol Pharm.* 2017; 2(12): 1064.

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at a virtual conference. One such example is the one day conference organized by local AAPS discussion groups such as the Annual AAPS NERDG (Northeast Regional Discussion Group) meeting. Traditional conferences often have a career services event which is a big attraction for both employers and job-seekers alike. Such shorter conferences could still have a condensed career services event, by having virtual preliminary interviews conducted prior to the physical event.

The main recommendations for transitioning to virtual conferences are highlighted and summarized in Figure 1. Initial transition to virtual conferences should ideally be a hybrid process, wherein some aspects of traditional conferences are still retained.

A virtual pharmacy resident conference was organized and successfully implemented by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) pharmacy residency program for its pharmacy residents. Their findings revealed that the virtual conference attendance increased by 50% when compared to a traditional pharmacy resident conference. Also, their study found that they were able to offer the pharmacist employees from the VHA exposure to resident research findings and aid their individual professional development by removing limitations of conference related travel expenses [5].

In addition to motivating student pharmacists to present their research findings at conferences, training them to organize conferences especially those which are entirely organized by the students themselves would be a great way to help them build organizational skills and learn about moderator/facilitator roles. One barrier to such an endeavor would be the PharmD student's challenging work/study schedule. Non-traditional PharmD students sometimes face additional challenges and would not be able to participate. Also, many students while enrolled in the PharmD program are occasionally unable to attend several traditional conferences as a part of their professional development due to financial constraints. This is where a full virtual online conference would be useful on several levels. This would require collaboration between the university or college and a professional or scientific pharmacy organization who share a common goal of facilitating the professional development of student pharmacists. GRASP meeting (Graduate Research Association of Students in Pharmacy) is an example of a conference which is organized by graduate students in the pharmaceutical sciences,

although this is currently a traditional conference.

Educational or instructional sessions are important features of many pharmacy conferences. In recent times, MOOCs (massive open online courses) have become very popular. These courses are designed to have open access via the internet and were primarily developed for distance education [6]. Some of the notable providers in this field have been Coursera®, Khan Academy, etc. A feature of MOOCs is the use of interactive user forums to facilitate interactions between students and professors. Organizations such as the AACP (American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy) could use a format similar to these open online courses to offer courses/workshop presentations on teaching skills in the pharmaceutical sciences and pharmacy practice which are usually a part of the traditional AACP conferences. One such example of a well-developed course was entitled "University Teaching 101" offered by John Hopkins University through Coursera®.

Currently, webinar formats are being used very efficiently for several different purposes. Scientific organizations such as the AAPS now have monthly webinars on a range of topics. In addition, the organization also recently introduced AAPS eCourses which are intended to provide additional training in the pharmaceutical and biopharmaceutical sciences using novel educational material to scientists/students/industry professionals who are engaged in the field of pharmaceutical sciences. These courses are designed and facilitated by subject experts and renowned researchers in the field. They also provide participants with the opportunity to receive a completion certificate. It is encouraging that such scientific organizations are moving towards a virtual trend and being successful in such endeavors.

Implications

At educational institutions significant cost savings could be potentially incurred from having virtual conferences. These savings would be passed on to not only the faculty (for other faculty development programs) but also to the pharmacy student by providing him/her with better infrastructure such as more modernly equipped state of the art teaching and research laboratories and quiet study spaces.

In summary, professional development for pharmacy faculty, non-academic pharmaceutical scientists and pharmacy students and even practicing pharmacists as achieved by attending conferences will always remain ingrained in academia and the scientific community. Using technology to its highest potential to achieve this goal should continue to take center stage.

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