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STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM ENABLES CAREER SUCCESS

I set out on the journey to establish the student exchange program here at the University of Findlay, College of Pharmacy, following an article that I wrote for this journal in 2009. Only during the write up for that article I became aware that India had started enrollment into their first PharmD program in 2008. My first thought was – why? And what type of opportunities India has created for those graduates.

During my subsequent three visits to India from 2010 – 2012 confirmed my worst fears. While India's pharmacy council transplanted the PharmD program and copied part of the western syllabus, unlike the western countries, it didn't open any new opportunities for those graduating students to practice. Even today, a decade after start of awarding their first PharmD degrees, registered pharmacist in India could be anyone with a 2 year (Diploma), 4 year (B.Pharm) or 6-year (M.Pharm or PharmD) degree holder! Result, not surprisingly, many pharmacy graduates wish to explore opportunities abroad.

During our graduation last week at the University of Findlay, 116 graduates were awarded master's in health informatics degree. Only 8 of those graduates were from US and the remaining were all international students – India [103], Nepal [4] and Nigeria [1]. Looking at these large number of international students, holding a degree with extremely limited job market, but carrying a large educational debt motivated me to write this article.

During the past few months, many students graduating with master's in health informatics have started contacting me on what type of career

recommendations I have for them. My answer at this point – none. It is too late for me to make any useful recommendation. Almost all these students from India [those are the once who confide in me] once they have their first college degree from India had approached a “recruiting agent” and sought their advice on what degree is most marketable in US. Naturally, a very motivated student seriously interested in pursuing a graduate program of his/ her interest – is not going to approach a stranger [a college recruiting broker agent] for his recommendation on what they should pursue.

Agent may do an interview with the student to identify whether the students meet some basic requirements to the institution they are recommending. However, they end up painting a very rosy picture of life in America with easy access to jobs and opportunities to attract these recruits for colleges. They have no incentive to point out the challenges those students would face once they arrive in US, as their commission depends on student enrolling and paying their fee at the college they are seeking admission. Then these students are recommended to apply to institutions with right reputation so that students could get admitted and their student-visa approved.

Student exchange program - like the one at the University of Findlay, allows students a real-life firsthand US experience that enables them to make better career decisions. So far, I had the opportunity to interact and guide over fifty of these students. After their return to India and completion of their PharmD, couple of them have joined well-established Ph.D programs in US and Canada and one of them graduated with her Ph.D this spring. Several others have been able to identify specialized healthcare areas leveraging their PharmD expertise and continue to work in India.

In the following paragraphs, I present alternative pathways that had resulted in more favorable and pleasant experience for all concerned parties.

Nashat, had completed her B.Pharm degree from a reputable institution in India. She approached her professor [not an agent or a stranger] and sought his advice on his recommendation for an institution in US where she could get her PharmD. As the professor had visited the University of Findlay, liked the faculty, our facilities, classroom teaching



and the campus, recommended her to get in touch with me. We had couple of audio and video conversation before she started the application process.

Once I understood that her sister, already in USA could provide her with financial and emotional support – I believed she will be able to complete her PharmD education successfully. Even though she was a good student from a reputable institution, first year was hard. It took time to get adjusted to weather, loneliness, food, time management, and weekly quizzes. When at the end of first term she came to my office and indicated her desire to go to India – I recommended against it, and she canceled the planned visit. When the temperature fell well below -10 °F during January-February of the first year, reaching class at 8 am by walking one mile from her apartment to college became challenging – I volunteered and gave her rides. After one year situation stabilized – she had made new friends, found work at the MTM center [Medication therapy management center], which complemented her didactic classes, found an apartment closer to campus. She successfully graduated in 2021, in the middle of covid pandemic. While CVS offered her a job soon after graduation and applied for her H-1B visa, her H-1B got approved only during the second attempt. To have someone in town, who was personally committed to her success – contributed to a positive outcome in her professional journey.

Manasa visited USA in her 3rd year of PharmD program. She enjoyed the classroom experience at the University of Findlay, where pharmacy practice classes are taught by faculty who are themselves practicing pharmacist. In her institution at home, even the Dean wondered about the need for PharmD program – as he didn't, like most others in India see any value of pharmacist in patient care. Manasa decided to transfer to the University of Findlay after her fourth year, though the home college made her pay full fee for the two remaining years before releasing her certificate.

She had financial and emotional support of her brother, who lived in US. While she faced similar challenges faced by Nashat, as she is both more outgoing and extrovert than Nashat, found a job at

the Buford center, fought and won the right for international pharmacy students at UF to work and gain pharmacy experience beyond what is available as IPPE and APPE experiences. She graduated with PharmD degree in 2022, went on to do a pharmaceutical company fellowship. As she demonstrated her value in that role, company offered her a full-time employment even before she completed her fellowship contract!

Dikta and Abhinaya, both did their month-long rotation at the University of Findlay one year apart. They are both Nepalese citizens, who happened to be doing their PharmD at the Karnataka College of Pharmacy [KCP] when Dr. Raju Koneri was in-charge of the PharmD program at that institution. Dr. Koneri believed in the power of student-exchange in expanding opportunities for his students. We signed an MOU with KCP, and for the next three years he provided excellent opportunity for UF students to learn from their visits at Bangalore Baptist Hospital. However, it was clear from my visits to KCP that no one in the college administration shared or was interested in this venture. Therefore, exchanges ended when Dr. Koneri left KCP employment.

Unlike Manasa, Dikta and Abhinaya completed their PharmD program at KCP. As they were now familiar with both Findlay and me, they decided to apply for Masters program in Findlay. However, their entry was delayed by three years due to the arrival of Covid. On encouragement from Abhinaya, Dikta decided to fulfill her long-time dream of competing in a beauty pageant and ended up representing Nepal. Preparation for that contest enabled her to develop her various soft-skills that are an added asset in all walks of life.

When Dikta returned to start her Masters program in Findlay in 2022, she had a solid action plan. She became a star performer at the MTM center. Abhinaya followed on her footsteps. Director of the MTM center liked them enough to work out an arrangement for these two to work 50% of the time as student employee and the remaining hours as an intern without pay. Working at MTM center, strengthened their clinical skills and allowed Dikta to complete NAPLEX successfully and has already been offered a job at Rite Aid. As of this writing –



Abhinaya is scheduled to take NAPLEX this summer and has already had an offer from Walgreens.

For each of the above students it took them six-years before they could achieve their goals. With change in demographics, second and third-tier colleges in West [US, Canada, Australia, UK] all depend on international students for revenue generation and balancing their budgets. Agents who make their livelihood by their strong desire to leave their home country at any cost – provide a rosy picture that is mostly incomplete and untrue. Banks are eager to lend you money – as you are responsible to pay back, even if the product that you were promised is fraudulent!

Hope this article enables some of you to make the tough choices before embarking on a costly and life-altering journey. If you wish personalized advice and guidance for your professional journey, please contact Karthik Rakam of Avenida [karthik@avidapro.com]