Pharmacy students to graduate early in preparation for future COVID-19 impact

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WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Purdue University's College of Pharmacy is granting early graduation to 144 students to help cover a potential shortage of pharmacists during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purdue Trustees approved the move on Thursday (April 9), making Purdue one of the first in the nation to certify its entire class of eligible students.

Pharmacy Dean Eric Barker formally requested and received the ability to grant the certification of the school’s senior class of students for licensure exams. All of the students meet the requirements of the program and the College’s accreditation.

Effective April 17, the certification also offers an early jump to the health field with the students eligible to work as graduate pharmacists until fully licensed. “I’ve already received inquiries from a health system about making our graduates available in case they face likely staffing shortages,” Barker said. “Having additional trained clinical pharmacists, even graduate pharmacists, will become increasingly important.”

As a top pharmacy program, Purdue is one of few places in the nation that can certify its entire class of pharmacy students for licensure exams early. The College of Pharmacy has a front-loaded experiential education program that offers students flexibility in getting the necessary experience.

Barker said there are concerns that pharmacy workforce issues could develop in the coming months, depending on how COVID-19 spreads. “Health care systems and community pharmacies have shifted to remote work where possible and divided their pharmacy staffs into teams to reduce the likelihood of an outbreak infecting an entire staff,” he said. “Such efforts have placed a strain on the existing workforce.

Darren Covington, executive vice president of the Indiana Pharmacists Association, said the organization has received reports of pharmacies temporarily closing because the pharmacists were possibly exposed or infected. Other pharmacies have reported worker shortages.

“By allowing the 2020 graduating pharmacy class to work now, this will help ensure continuity of patient care, especially for our smaller pharmacies which are more vulnerable because they may only have a few pharmacists at most,” Covington said.

There are as many as 6,000 pharmacists in Indiana, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

There is a secondary benefit to certification of the college’s senior class a month early. Testing centers for licensure exams have been operating at reduced capacity during the virus crises, and that could lead to a backlog of exams scheduling for the summer months.

By moving graduating students forward, the College of Pharmacy is giving graduates the ability to schedule their exam date now. The College of Pharmacy action was approved by Purdue Provost Jay Akridge as well as endorsed by the Accreditation Council on Pharmacy Education, the National Board of Pharmacy, and the Indiana Board of Pharmacy.

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Source: Eric Barker, barkerel@purdue.edu. In addition to phone interviews, the dean is available for online video interviews.