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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. "I've already received inquiries from a health system about making our graduates available in case they face likely workforce challenges," said Barker. "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. "Many of our students are now entering the workforce in the midst of the pandemic," Barker said. "As a front-loaded experiential education program that offers students flexibility in getting the necessary experience, Purdue is well positioned to help meet workforce needs." 

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."

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," said Darren Covington, executive vice president of the Indiana Pharmacists Association. 

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 are operating at a 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.

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