

# Development and implementation of a group interviews and evaluation process for pharmacy admissions at a large urban institution

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The Admissions Committee at Long Island University College of Pharmacy (LIU Pharmacy) developed and implemented a group interview format for the 2015-2016 admissions cycle. The new process, which included a group interview, a critical thinking exercise and a campus tour, allowed for 300 pharmacy school candidates to be interviewed in four full-day sessions. This article reports the experience of developing and implementing group interviews at LIU Pharmacy.

**Methods:** Four full-day sessions were scheduled to interview pharmacy school candidates during the spring of 2016. Seventy-five candidates were divided into three groups of 25 for each session and rotated through three sections: 1) group interview; 2) critical thinking exercise; and 3) campus tour. The Office of Admissions at LIU Pharmacy organised the interview schedule and a total of 48 faculty, alumni and staff evaluators were trained.

**Results:** Group interviews were conducted to interview 300 candidates in four full-day sessions at LIU Pharmacy. Total evaluator interviewing hours were reduced by 20% when compared to the previous year. Feedback surveys from candidates and evaluators showed acceptable levels of satisfaction and comfortability with the new interview process.

**Discussion:** The development and implementation of group interviewing at LIU Pharmacy allowed for 300 pharmacy school candidates to be interviewed in four full-day sessions during the 2015-2016 admission cycle.

**Keywords:** *Admissions, Interviews, Group, Pharmacy, Education*

## Introduction

According to the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards 2016, colleges of pharmacy are required to develop, implement, and assess admissions criteria, policies and procedures into the professional programme (ACPE, 2016a). A vital component in achieving this standard is through candidate interviews. In the United States of America (USA), the vast majority of health professional schools (medicine, dental, pharmacy, nursing and public health) have adopted candidate interviews to identify cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed for success in their programmes (Glazer *et al.*, 2016). When utilised, ACPE recommends that candidate interviews be standardised to assess affective domain characteristics such as: self-awareness, leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship, and professionalism. ACPE, however, does not specify the manner in which interviews should be performed allowing individual institutions to develop their own format (ACPE, 2016b).

Structured interviews offer higher reliability and validity when compared to unstructured interviews. Standardised interview questions and scoring rubrics can be developed to assess communication skills and other components of the affective domain as well as reduce certain biases such

as evaluator leniency, favouritism and stereotyping (Latif, 2005). Several interviewing formats exist including the traditional individual interviews and the newer multiple mini-interviews; some of which contain writing components, reasoning tests or critical thinking exercises (Cameron & MacKeigan, 2012; Kelsch & Friesner, 2014). Group interviewing for admissions has been described by the University of North Florida, School of Nursing (Trice & Foster, 2008). Trice & Foster (2008) recognised the labor intensity required during the admissions process at their institution and transitioned to conducting small group interviews. In addition, the recent report by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) 2013-2015 Special Committee on Admissions recommended that a holistic process be adopted to evaluate applicants with the potential to develop characteristics described by ACPE (Wall *et al.*, 2015). As a result, new approaches in selection policies and procedures may be needed due to the changing nature of the pharmacy profession (Shaw *et al.*, 2015).

Long Island University College of Pharmacy (LIU Pharmacy) in the USA is a historically diverse school of pharmacy established in Brooklyn, New York in 1886. Being a fairly large institution (entering class size ~200 students), LIU Pharmacy is required to interview

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approximately 300 candidates per admission cycle. Admissions interviews in previous years required 15 sessions (ten interviewers per session; 20 candidates per session) to conduct 50-minute individual interviews with two evaluators for each candidate. With this previous method, the total evaluator interviewing hours amounted to 500 hours per academic year. Individual interviews were labour intensive at LIU Pharmacy with the main challenges being the training of evaluators, scheduling of interview dates and reserving of rooms. In addition, evaluator feedback in previous years has consistently expressed concerns with rehearsed answers from candidates. Lastly, the previous interview process did not offer opportunities for potential candidates to tour the campus, view the facilities, or meet current students and staff.

The Admissions Committee at LIU Pharmacy developed and implemented a group interview and evaluation process starting in October 2015 for enrolment into the pharmacy programme in September 2016. The new process was restructured to include a group interview, a critical thinking exercise and a campus tour. This article reports the experience of developing and implementing a novel interview approach at LIU Pharmacy. To the authors' knowledge, no other report has been published describing the group interview process at a college of pharmacy.

## Methods

In September of 2015, the Admissions Committee at LIU Pharmacy began routine meetings to restructure the interview process. Designing and scheduling of a group evaluation format was modelled after the University of North Florida, School of Nursing, the LIU Pharmacy School of Physical/Occupational Therapy, and the current LIU Pharmacy Objective Structured Clinical Exams (OSCEs) (Shaw *et al.*, 2015; Shriwalker, 2015). A motion to adopt group interviewing by the Admissions Committee was passed by a majority vote in October 2015. A pilot interview session (20 early eligible candidates) was carried out in November 2015 to determine the logistics and feasibility of the new format. Based on feedback from evaluators and candidates who participated in the pilot, the Admissions Committee finalised the schedule and structure for larger scale interview sessions.

The new interview process consisted of four full-day sessions. Each session was broken down into three sections: a group interview, a critical thinking exercise and a tour of the campus. Three groups of 25 candidates were assigned to rotate between the three sections (two in the morning and one after lunch) as detailed in Table I. Implementing this design allowed for a total of 75 candidates to be simultaneously evaluated in one day. With four full-day sessions scheduled, a total of 300 candidates would be evaluated during the 2015-2016 admission cycle.

Candidate applications were initially screened by the Office of Admissions according to the Admissions

Criteria and eligible students were permitted to sign up for one of the four scheduled interview sessions. For each session, a maximum of 75 candidates were allowed to sign up on a rolling basis. The Admissions Coordinator at LIU Pharmacy reserved and secured one large orientation room (75 candidates), five classrooms for group interviewing (five candidates per group per classroom), and five classrooms for the critical thinking exercise (five candidates per group per classroom) for each interview day. Group assignments (coloured stickers) and seating arrangements (A, B, C, D or E) were randomly pre-selected, printed on name tags, and designated in an orientation folder for each of the 75 candidates. Labelling of classrooms and seats was also arranged before each interview day.

**Table I: Design and schedule for each interview session day (75 candidates)**

Time	Red Group (25)	Yellow Group (25)	Green Group (25)
09:00	Registration and Orientation		
09:40 - 11:00	Group Interviews (5 groups of 5)	Critical Thinking Exercise (5 groups of 5)	Tour of Campus (all 25)
11:10 - 12:30	Critical Thinking Exercise	Tour of Campus	Group Interviews
12:30 - 14:00	Dean's Welcome Message/Lunch		
14:10 - 15:00	Tour of Campus	Group Interviews	Critical Thinking Exercise

Each interview day began at 09:00. Forty minutes were allotted for registration and orientation. Upon arrival, all candidates registered and received an interview packet, name tag and schedule for the day. Gathering in a large orientation room, the Admissions Coordinator outlined the schedule and provided instructions on the three rotating sections. Personnel from the Office of Admissions kept track of time and guided each group to their scheduled locations. Absentee candidates were noted and logged on file.

The design for the group interview section required two evaluators to interview a group of five candidates simultaneously in 80 minutes. Therefore, a total of ten evaluators were needed for each day to interview 75 candidates. Sitting as a group in pre-assigned seats, candidates were each asked the same interview questions in a sequential fashion. Five questions were asked in a round-robin format to ensure that each candidate had a chance to answer one question first. Two additional questions were allotted in the event of extra time. Each candidate was evaluated individually by both evaluators on listening, speaking, integrating, expressing, sincerity, community service, body language/gestures and professionalism. Time was allotted for evaluators to score each candidate in the 80 minute time frame on a rubric sheet (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Admissions group interview assessment categories**

Listening	Speaking	Integrating	Expressing	Body Language	Sincerity	Community Service	Professional Dress
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**Figure 2: Admissions critical thinking task assessment categories**

Teamwork Collaboration Cooperation	Leadership Skills	Communication	Problem Solving	Self- Management	Ethical Reasoning
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The design of the critical thinking exercise also required two evaluators for each group task (total of ten evaluators). For each section, the five groups (the same pre-assigned group as the group interview) were each placed in a classroom and assigned a group assignment. Two evaluators silently observed each group as the candidates worked as a team to carry out a critical thinking exercise based on an ethical dilemma. The group assignment was created to encourage debate, discussion and ethical reasoning. Each group was given an opportunity to present and defend their final decision on the ethical dilemma. Candidates were evaluated individually as well as in a team setting by both evaluators on problem solving and communication skills, teamwork ability, ethical reasoning, leadership and self-management. The total time of each critical thinking exercise section was 80 minutes, which included time for evaluators to score each candidate on a rubric sheet (Figure 2).

For the third section, student volunteers were recruited to lead the campus tour. LIU Pharmacy student organisation leaders were asked to sign up and participate on each interview day. Along with LIU Pharmacy personnel, the current students led a group of 25 candidates on a campus tour of classrooms, laboratories, the gym, and food court. Students were encouraged to engage in questions and answers with the potential candidates. The total time allotted for each campus tour was 80 minutes.

A training presentation outlining the group interviews and the critical thinking exercise was created by the Admissions Committee and presented to all faculty and staff at a retreat in January 2016. Evaluators were each asked to sign up for two full sessions and assigned to either the group interview or the critical thinking exercise sections. Alumni were recruited and trained individually either online or over the telephone and assigned to a section. Training was also available on the day of each interview 30 minutes before the first section. Evaluators were placed in pairs (with at least one faculty member in each pair) for each interview session. A folder containing name tags, interview time schedules, room locations and scoring rubrics, was given to each evaluator at the beginning of each interview session. Evaluators remained in their assigned rooms for the entire session while candidates rotated between sections.

The Admissions Committee created and finalised a scoring rubric for the group interview and the critical thinking exercise according to ACPE Standards 2016 and

Bloom's Competency Taxonomy (Bloom *et al.*, 1956; ACPE 2016a). The Dean of LIU Pharmacy was asked to prepare a 15 minute welcome message. Boxed lunches were ordered for all candidates and evaluators.

Feedback surveys were developed by the Admissions Committee for both candidates and evaluators to gather information after each interview session. An exempt application was submitted and approved by the LIU Pharmacy Institutional Review Board (ID#16/02-466) to administer paper and online feedback surveys. All evaluators and candidates were asked to fill out either a paper or online post-interview survey. Paper versions were provided in each interview folder packet and online versions were emailed as a link immediately following each interview session. Evaluators and candidates were instructed to only fill out one survey (paper or online). All surveys were kept anonymous. Data were gathered by the Office of Admissions and analysed using Microsoft Excel.

## Results

### *Total time & Resources*

Four interview dates were then selected on January 14, February 6, March 18 and April 10 in 2016 (two weekdays and two weekends). Back-up dates were scheduled for January and February dates in the event of inclement weather. For the 2015-2016 academic cycle, a total of 304 candidates (204 LIU pre-pharmacy and 100 college transfer candidates) were interviewed for admission into the pharmacy programme at LIU Pharmacy.

A total of 48 evaluators consisting of faculty, staff, and alumni were trained and participated in conducting interviews. Four full-day interview sessions were carried out with two sections in the morning and one section in the afternoon (with a one hour lunch). The total evaluator interviewing hours were 320 hours among all evaluators for the new process. This did not include training and preparation time. The total evaluator interviewing hours were reduced by 36% when compared to previous traditional individual interviews. Lunch was provided for all candidates and evaluators between sections 2 and 3 which included a welcome message from the Dean of Pharmacy. During lunch, candidates were seated with current students to allow an opportunity to ask questions about the pharmacy programme, campus life and extra-curricular activities.

### Feedback Surveys

Candidate feedback was assessed in the form of post-interview surveys (N = 272) via an online comprehensive assessment platform (baseline.campuslabs.com). On a Likert scale (1 – dissatisfied to 10 – very satisfied), candidates rated the overall interview process an 8.8+1.3 with overall satisfaction with the group interviews 8.3+1.8, critical thinking exercise 8.7+1.4, and campus tour 8.4+1.8, respectively (Table II). The percentage of candidates rating the overall interview process, the group interviews, the critical thinking exercise, and the campus tour a satisfied score of >7 (satisfied) was 87%, 71.1%, 82.6%, 75.5% respectively.

**Table II: Candidate feedback on the new group interview process**

Candidate Feedback	Mean (Scale 1-10)*	% Rated > 7 (Scale 1-10)*
Overall admissions process	8.8 ± 1.3	87.0
Group interviews	8.3 ± 1.8	71.1
Critical Thinking Task	8.7 ± 1.4	82.6
Campus Tour & lunch	8.4 ± 1.8	75.5

\*Likert scale: 1 – dissatisfied; 5 – neutral; 10 – very satisfied

**Table III: Evaluator feedback on the new group interview process**

Evaluator feedback		N = 52 (%)
Evaluator	Faculty	• 27 (51.9)
	Staff	• 11 (21.2)
	Alumni	• 14 (26.9)
Overall satisfaction with new interview process		• Mean = 8.4 ± 0.6 • Very satisfied = 44 (69.8%)
Likert scale: 1 – dissatisfied, 5 – neutral, 10 – very satisfied		
Preferred group interviews to individual interviews?		• Yes: 34 (56.7) • No: 4 (6.7) • Neutral/NA: 22 (36.7)
Comfort level with the new interview process		• Mean = 9.0 ± 0.6 • Very comfortable = 48 (80)
Likert scale: 1 – very uncomfortable - 10 – very comfortable		

Evaluator training for the new interview process was delivered by three methods: live training session (65.2%), separate one-on-one training (28.3%), and training on day of interview (6.5%). Evaluator feedback surveys (N=52) were completed by faculty (51.9%), staff

(21.2%), and alumni (26.9%) and collected at the end of the interview process. On a Likert scale (1 – dissatisfied to 10 – very satisfied), the overall satisfaction of the new interview process was 8.4+0.6. Of the evaluators who completed the feedback survey, 93.6% felt well-prepared for the interview process and 93.3% were neutral or preferred the new interview process compared to the previous individual interviews. Evaluators stated their comfort level with the new interview process as a 9.0+0.6 (Likert Scale: 1 - very uncomfortable to 10 - very comfortable) (Table III).

### Discussion

Admissions interviews allow for evaluation of characteristics in the affective domain as outlined by the ACPE Standards 2016. Verbal and non-verbal qualities in communication skills, maturity, and compassion can also be assessed with different interviewing formats.

The Admissions Committee at LIU Pharmacy developed and implemented a new group interview and evaluation process in October 2015. Compared to the previous format of individual interviews, group interviews at LIU Pharmacy reduced the total evaluator interviewing hours by 36%. By adopting this new format, two evaluators were able to assess 5 candidates simultaneously in 80 minutes. This new approach reduced the labor intensive burden on evaluators and staff and allowed for a more efficient evaluation of candidates. Implementing this new format also allowed for a more holistic evaluation of candidates with the critical thinking exercise and a chance to showcase the campus with a tour.

Overall, the majority of candidates and evaluators surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the new group interview format. The group interview format worked well when questions were asked using a sequential approach. Since the interview was conducted in a group format with questions asked sequentially, candidates appeared more likely to adapt their responses in real time. This may have decreased rehearsed responses from candidates, which was a concern with the previous traditional interview method. Although the majority of candidates stated that they felt comfortable with the group format several candidates provided comments stating they would have preferred individual interviews (more personal, less anxiety). This can be a potential drawback of the group interview and evaluation format.

The critical thinking exercise was created to assess candidates in a team setting on deciding an ethical dilemma. Overall satisfaction of the critical thinking exercise was positive among candidates as well as evaluators. Small classrooms are necessary to accommodate break out groups and a large classroom is needed for eventual gathering of all groups during discussion. The Admissions Committee decided on an ethical dilemma on a current social issue, but a writing component, a personality test, or a reasoning test could also be considered during this section.

The campus tour was an addition to this interview process and offered a chance for current LIU Pharmacy students to lead potential candidates and showcase the college. It was felt that student-led tours encouraged candidates to more openly ask questions regarding student life at LIU Pharmacy. The overall satisfaction with the campus tour was positive from candidate feedback surveys. Highlights from candidate feedback were viewing of the lecture halls, libraries, gym, laboratories and food court.

The authors conducted an invaluable pilot group interview session (20 candidates) to identify challenges and sort out scheduling strategies. However, conducting four full-day group interviews sessions for 300 candidates still uncovered several challenges. The major challenge was in scheduling and securing enough campus space for 75 candidates. Since LIU is a health professions college, all classrooms and facilities are shared between many schools. To properly conduct these group interviews, the authors had to reserve a large lecture hall for orientation, five small classrooms for the group interviews, and five small classrooms for the critical thinking exercise for the entire day. A full-time and well-trained Admissions Coordinator is essential for scheduling interviews, preparing interview material, reserving rooms and conducting the sequence of each interview day. Another potential challenge was the possibility of inclement weather, especially in the months of January or February. Back-up dates were scheduled but did not prove to be necessary for the 2015-2016 admissions cycle. It is advisable to book rooms and dates well in advance to allow for unforeseeable circumstances.

Although group interviewing reduced the total evaluator interviewing hours, the actual interview day is much longer for each candidate when compared to the previous 50 minute individual interviews. This may incur a heavy burden for students with full academic schedules. The authors did not compare the current feedback surveys with surveys from previous years because such data was not previously collected. It would have been beneficial to survey evaluators and candidates before and after the implementation of group interviews.

The Admissions Committee at LIU Pharmacy plans to continue the group interviewing and evaluation format. Some changes for the next admissions cycle include: recording a training presentation for both the group interview as well as the critical thinking exercise, revising the interview questions, re-evaluating the scoring rubric and correlating interview scores with progression in the curriculum.

## Conclusion

In accordance with AACP Standards, LIU Pharmacy implemented a group interview and evaluation process for admission into the pharmacy programme in October 2015. The new format offered an alternative to traditional

individual interviews and reduced total evaluator hours by 36%. In addition to increased efficiency, the new process also allowed for a more holistic assessment of candidates and offered an opportunity to showcase the campus. Based on feedback surveys, the new interview process was well-received by both candidates and evaluators at LIU Pharmacy after the first year of implementation.

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