College of pharmacy admissions offices have been busier than usual this spring. Faculty colleagues around the country report that applications to their doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) programs have increased between 50% and 100% over the past few years. The most recent data collected by AACP shows that applications to colleges of pharmacy have increased 78% (26,573 to 47,306) over the past 3 years.1 The increased number of applications represents more individuals applying to pharmacy colleges as well as individuals applying to more pharmacy colleges, and puts to rest a concern from a few years ago that conversion to the entry-level PharmD degree would discourage students from applying. But there is no guarantee that the application trend will continue.

The increase in applications is most likely attributable to the high salaries for pharmacy graduates, the availability of jobs after graduation, and the uncertainty in many other sectors of the economy, and is occurring at a time when the number of applications to medical schools is declining. The latest summary of medical school applications published in The Journal of the American Medical Association documents a 21% decline in applications over the past 5 years with a nationwide average of only 1.9 applicants for each student admitted to medical school.2 Based on these numbers, admission to pharmacy school appears to be as competitive as to medical school. Many of the students entering our colleges have records that would allow them admission to medical school, but they have chosen pharmacy as their career. Clearly, students are looking to a pharmacy education to achieve some of their most important goals in life, professional achievement, financial success, and/or service to others.

Although entering pharmacy students may have high prepharmacy grade point averages (GPA) and Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT) scores, this does not ensure that we are admitting the “cream of the crop,” students who have a professional mindset and are culturally and emotionally prepared to become healthcare providers. While the increased competition for admission allows colleges greater selectivity to enroll individuals with higher traditional measures of intellect (GPA and PCAT scores) than their predecessors, we should use this opportunity to address equally important issues for our entering classes, such as professionalism, emotional maturity, motivation to serve, and underrepresentation by minorities.

The increased number of applicants to colleges of pharmacy should be viewed as a significant opportunity for the profession of pharmacy. Recognizing that there are many factors that affect the practice of pharmacy, the characteristics of the people becoming pharmacists is certainly one of the most important. We have all seen how quickly the students in our classrooms become the practitioners working next to us. Attracting the best and brightest, with professional mindsets and cultural competence, can be a self-perpetuating trend. As these individuals become practitioners, researchers, and pharmacy faculty members they will attract others with similar attributes.

With the gift of many applicants and the opportunity to select students with the potential to advance pharmaceutical care, pharmacy educators have the responsibility to provide rigorous, challenging curricula that prepare students to solve drug-related problems faced by a culturally-diverse society, and to produce professionals who will go on to succeed in a highly competitive biomedical research environment. Our students can push pharmacy practice to the next level of patient-oriented health care. For this to happen, we should ensure that incoming students are not just book smart but that they also have the necessary traits of a health care professional (such as altruism and empathy), characteristics not measured by GPA or PCAT scores. The combination of high intellect, a professional mindset, and cultural competence in our students can go a long way to advance our profession.

In summary, we are fortunate to have much greater interest in our profession from talented young people. Their intellect, motivation, and ambition will challenge us as faculty members to do our best and result in improved pharmacy education and ultimately, better health care.

REFERENCES