Each year since 2012, Duquesne student pharmacists travel to Washington, D.C. to advocate on behalf of their future profession and those they will serve. Duquesne has the only school of pharmacy in the country that requires all students to participate in a professional development and advocacy course, including a class trip to Capitol Hill, as a requirement for graduation. The intent of the program is to expose students to legislative processes that can have a major effect on their careers and the lives of their patients.

“I had a lengthy conversation with a legislative staff member about what exactly a pharmacist does. It really opened my eyes to the fact that many people do not know what we are training to do,” says Elizabeth Eckhoff, Pharm.D. candidate class of 2021 and class president, who believes many in leadership positions don’t realize pharmacists do more than hand out medication—they are a vital part of a patient’s overall health.

This past October, a group of second- and third-year student pharmacists traveled with Duquesne law students to visit the United States Pharmacopeia (USP) in Rockville, Md., and various legislators on Capitol Hill. Students spent time at the USP headquarters to gain exposure to alternate pharmacy career paths and visited members of Congress to discuss issues affecting health care.

Dr. Janet Astle, School of Pharmacy assistant dean for student services, believes students’ ability to advocate on behalf of patients and their profession will result in “positive health outcomes for patients and their communities.”

She explains the School of Pharmacy has seen an increase in student advocacy efforts as a result of the trip, and “an uptick in the number of students who voluntarily participate in other advocacy efforts, such as the annual Pennsylvania Pharmacists Association Legislative Day event in Harrisburg.” The school has also noticed an increase in the number of legislators who have signed on as co-sponsors in support of various health care-related bills.

Student Pharmacists and Law Students Partner for Advocacy

Health policy is an integral part of the professional development and advocacy trip. Since 2015, Duquesne law students have accompanied student pharmacists on the trip and helped to prepare pharmacy students for discussions with legislators.
School of Law Professor Rhonda Gay Hartman, who teaches health policy law courses, believes the partnership between the two schools enables productive advocacy. “The law students learn from the student pharmacists and gain a deep appreciation about pharmacists’ concerns, roles and tasks,” she says. “In turn, the law students guide the student pharmacists in developing persuasive arguments to effectively influence legislators about health policy issues. Collaborating in this way enables effective advocacy with both groups lobbying for legislative change.”

The two groups collaborated on their arguments in support of a major piece of legislation—the Pharmacy and Medically Underserved Areas Enhancement Act—that would grant pharmacists provider status in underserved areas and allow pharmacists to be reimbursed for their services beyond dispensing medication.

“The trip would not have been as successful without the use of teamwork,” says third-year law student Brandon Schall. “Pharmacy students took control of the issue providing the necessary personal touch highlighting the importance of this particular piece of legislation, while law students aided in the effectiveness of the arguments as they pertained to politics and the law.”

Not only did the students benefit from working together, but they also learned the importance of being active participants in their future professions.

“It’s easy to think that one person can’t have an input on the future, but that’s far from the truth,” says Miranda Burgman, Pharm.D. candidate class of 2020. “If you’re passionate about something, let your voice be heard and never stop advocating for it. It feels good knowing that your voice matters and that Duquesne allows students to participate in this incredible experience.”

**The Evolution of Pharmacy**

Not that long ago, a pharmacist was once seen as someone who dispensed medication and ensured patient safety. Today, pharmacists have taken on additional responsibilities and more expansive roles, including educator, medical counselor and health care advocate. Burgman, who was part of the October trip, explains the importance of the role today’s pharmacists play in the overall health and wellness of patients.

“The world of health care is constantly evolving and the role of a pharmacist is becoming increasingly more important,” she says. “Pharmacists of today are now accessible health care professionals who assist patients in having the best quality of care.”

Pharmacists do more than give patients their medicine. They conduct comprehensive patient medication reviews, take patient blood pressure and monitor blood sugar levels, administer immunizations and work closely with physicians to optimize patient drug regimens.

“I left Washington, D.C. with the realization that it’s up to those of us within the profession to advocate for the future of pharmacy—even if that means simply educating people on what it means to be a pharmacist,” says Eckhoff.