

How to plan a white coat ceremony

An important event on the road to professionalism



By Ami Doshi

For years, the white coat has been the symbol of health care providers. The coat fully encompasses the clinical aspect of pharmacy, which has been increasingly emphasized, as more schools transition to offering only PharmD programs. Traditionally, students across the country have marked their entry into the profession by reciting the Oath of a Pharmacist at graduation. In order to initiate this professionalism earlier, however, a new trend has arisen: holding the white coat ceremony.

The Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy at Rutgers University integrated this event with their transition orientation (an event that introduces pre-pharmacy students to their professional years) 3 years ago. Inspired by Rutgers' success, here is a brief overview on how to plan a white coat ceremony.

Begin by setting a date. The three common options are freshman orientation, the transition year, or before rotations. Holding the ceremony during freshman orientation is uncommon, but doing so makes an earlier connection between academics and the profession. Rutgers holds its ceremony during the fall of the first professional year of classes. Students feel a sense of accomplishment once their pre-professional years have been completed, and this event brings the entire class together to begin its 4-year journey. Other schools feel "cloaking" students before rotations is most appropriate, as it validates their clinical role as student-pharmacists.

Choose a time, afternoon or evening. The time sets the overall mood for the event. In the afternoon, the occasion could be combined with an orientation. Having a panel of faculty answering questions about the upcoming years can equip students with the necessary pharmacy survival information. Another option is to have speakers attend to discuss professionalism as it applies to student pharmacists. If the event is held in the evening, a candlelight ceremony could be added to create a more solemn atmosphere. To expand the occasion into more of a social event, refreshments could be provided and students could invite guests. Whatever the timing, the goal is to tailor the ceremony to the students' desires.

Finalize the agenda. Involving alumni, faculty, and representatives of professional organizations helps generate funding

and creative ideas. This year at Rutgers, two speakers addressed the students before they were presented with their white coats. This inspiring addition to the ceremony aided in making the connection between being a student and a professional. A candle-lighting ceremony was held following the speakers, during which the students recited a pledge written by a dean. This pledge created a standard that students can look toward during their academic years, before they take the Oath of a Pharmacist at graduation. Regardless of what the specific agenda entails, collectively reciting a promise marks the beginning of the next stage.

Present the white coats. This can be handled in many ways and should be done in a way that reflects the personality of the school. Decisions about whether to cloak or hand students their coats and whether to call students to receive their coats individually or to present the coats all at once should be made carefully. At Rutgers, students are presented their coats individually.

There are many options to consider when planning a white coat ceremony. It is important to keep in mind that organization is key. Creating a planning committee that includes students, faculty, and alumni is a safe way to make sure that all those involved have their voices heard.

No matter which form the ceremony takes, the significance of the event is an important aspect of pharmacy professionalism.

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