

Producing *Independent Leaders*



Karl Fiebelkorn (far right) with Christopher Daly, Clare Carroll, and Christopher Diehl as they are honored at UB's annual awards night for students and alumni. The three finished third in the 2011 Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition.



University at Buffalo's Karl Fiebelkorn devoted to grooming the next generation of community pharmacists

by Chris Linville

As a pharmacist and an educator, Karl Fiebelkorn has some basic concepts that he tries to instill in his pupils.

"I am trying to produce students who are leaders," he says. "And when you produce students who are leaders, you produce pharmacists who are leaders. And those are the people who help lead and make the changes."

It is a theme he has been emphasizing for some 25 years at the University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences (UBSPPS) in Buffalo, N.Y. In 1991, Fiebelkorn began teaching a pharmacy management elective class at UBSPPS, recognizing that students who wanted to own their own pharmacies needed fundamentals to run a business effectively. Drawing on his own experience working for independent pharmacies and a regional chain in western New York, Fiebelkorn tried to give them a well-rounded foundation beyond simply filling prescriptions.

"They (UBSPPS) needed somebody to teach a business class," says Fiebelkorn, who received his B.S. in pharmacy from UB in 1978. "It was an elective, but it was a popular elective. Out of 100 students, I always had 30-50 taking the course."

Fiebelkorn, who received an MBA from UB in 1988, joined the school's faculty full-time more than 20 years ago, and since that time he has pushed for the course to become mandatory. Finally, about three years ago the Accreditation Council of Pharmacy Education mandated that students learn management, and UBSPPS made it a required part of the pharmacy curriculum. Fiebelkorn has since



added a spring independent pharmacy course to complement the fall course, which covers general management concepts. This course, PHM 637 Pharmacy Management, has 125 students. Students groups must comprise a business plan based on a theoretical pharmacy case. "I give them a scenario that I make up, it's broadly written, and you have to act like you are approaching a bank to make the business case," he says. "You have to figure out how much money you are going to need, and how you are going to go about it. How are you going to improve this business, or sell it, or do something else? A lot of them come up with some pretty good ideas about how they are going to go about it and what they are going to do, and a lot of them think out of the box. That's what I encourage."

The spring elective course, PHM 638 Independent Pharmacy, meets two hours once a week and consists of seminars, pharmacy visits, lectures, case studies, entrepreneurialism, and anything else related to independent pharmacy. The class, which enrolls about 25-30 students, is run in a seminar format. The students are divided into teams which visit 3-4 pharmacies each. They interview the pharmacist owner to evaluate how the business is doing and if the students can come up with ideas for improvements. The teams then formulate a PowerPoint presentation which is presented in the class using tools learned in PHM 637 the previous fall.

The 2007 UB team members work on the presentation that would win that year's Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition. From left are Alexandra Centeno, Liliana Yobonn, Fiebelkorn, Kathryn Jones, and Christina Ramsey.

"In PHM 637 I tell them this is how you have to do things, and finding a way to get paid for it," Fiebelkorn says. "In the spring session, PHM 638, I expect the students to analyze real pharmacies and come up with real ideas."

Along with teaching, Fiebelkorn has been the advisor for the UB NCPA chapter for more than a decade, assisting student teams competing in regional business competitions and the annual Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition. (See sidebar.)

Brad Arthur, 2015-16 NCPA president and co-owner of Black Rock Pharmacy in Buffalo, has known Fiebelkorn for almost 30 years and has always admired his dedication.

"Having started out as a community pharmacist, Karl always possessed an appreciation for the human side of the patients we serve," Arthur says. "It takes a champion to instill the spirit of independent community pharmacy

Helping Plan for the Future

For the last decade Karl Fiebelkorn has been the advisor for the University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences NCPA Student chapter. He said when he started, the chapter was almost dormant, with a just a few students.

"My first year was the second year that NCPA had the business plan competition (Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition: www.ncpanet.org/students/business-plan-competition), and I had students who came up to me and said they wanted to enter," he says. "I didn't even know anything about it."

After finding out more about the competition, he asked his students, "Okay, what are you going to do? They did not even have that much of a management background. So we all spent a lot of weekends together and a lot of nights during the week figuring out what to do and how to approach this thing. I had to teach them business skills. And that first year we entered (2005) we came in second. So that really set the fire for NCPA here, and now we have 50 or 80 members in the active chapter. I started a local competition, which I call the 'local NCPA competition' a few years ago with three teams competing to be the NCPA team."

"The Pharmacists Society of the State of New York (PSSNY) heard about my success with the students so they started their own business plan program, which also helps prepare and motivate students for the NCPA competition," Fiebelkorn says. "In the last event, PSSNY had a few of its pharmacists get together and write a case study that was extremely vague by design."

"The reason they did that is they wanted to see how much out of the box the students could formulate and do, and it was based on getting 'x' amount of money and asking what you would do with it with an independent pharmacy. My team came in second in that competition so they did okay."

By 2007, that extra experience paid off as the UBSPPS team won that year's competition in Anaheim, Calif.

Fiebelkorn says the caliber of the competition has become much better compared to the early years. (The event was started in 2004.)

"I think the teams have been getting more sophisticated in what they are doing, and the students are getting more sophisticated in what they are learning," he says. "The first few years I was kind of disappointed in what some of the teams were presenting. As time went on, it got better and better. Doug Hoey (NCPA CEO) says to me, 'Karl, your team has been setting the standard, every time your students present, all the other

schools scramble. And the next year everyone is brought up to speed.' With the more recent competitions, they are getting much more sophisticated."

Fiebelkorn takes pride in the success his former students have enjoyed after competing in the competition. Among them being Patrick Comerford, PharmD, a co-owner with Mobile Pharmacy Solutions, a Buffalo-based pharmacy with a focus on in-home consultative and transitions in care services. Comerford participated in the 2006 competition.

"The business plan competition certainly ignited a fire for independent retail pharmacy that has never gone out," Comerford said in a September 2014 *America's Pharmacist* profile. "The ability to put together mock plans and develop some of the skills needed to operate in the independent setting has certainly come in handy."

Along with Comerford, Fiebelkorn referenced another former student who held on to her business plan until it was ready to be put to use again, even if it was years down the road. She was a student about 8-9 years ago and is now a clinical pharmacist at a Florida hospital. She called Fiebelkorn and said the hospital's health system director announced that it needed a new clinic, and somebody to develop it. She raised her hand and said she could do it, but wondered when they would need specific figures and numbers.

"She was asked if she could have it done in 6-8 weeks, and she said they could have it to them by the next week," Fiebelkorn says. "She said everything was ready because she had already done it for the business plan. She had it all laid out, she had all of the plans, because she says I made them do all of that," he adds with a laugh.

The result? "She now runs the clinic. And it's very successful, so it is being entrepreneurial even if you don't open your own pharmacy. I tell students that you do not even need to have a pharmacy to open, you could open a clinic or anything like that. A lot of pharmacists have other businesses and are still their own boss."

"Karl was instrumental in drumming up support for the Pruitt-Schutte Business Plan," says longtime friend Brad Arthur, 2015-16 NCPA president and co-owner of Black Rock Pharmacy in Buffalo. "Without his efforts the UB School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences would not likely have had such a vibrant student chapter of NCPA nor would they have finished so strong in numerous years of competing in the challenge."

ownership in young students, and Karl has filled that role with enthusiasm.”

Another friend, Steve Giroux, 2007-08 NCPA president and owner of Middleport Family Health Center in Middleport, N.Y., says, “Karl is a strong advocate for independent ownership as a career path for pharmacy students at UB. He has had a tremendous influence and impact on a new generation of pharmacists interested in or pursuing a career in independent pharmacy ownership. He represents the kind of faculty that NCPA would like to see at every pharmacy school in the country.”

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PHARMACY ADVOCATE

Trying to pigeonhole Fiebelkorn into any simple category is basically impossible. Yes, he’s a teacher and champion for student pharmacists. But he’s also a certified pharmacist immunization trainer, a certified medication therapy management trainer, and a board certified asthma educator. Fiebelkorn speaks regionally and nationally on a variety of subjects. He is active with local and state pharmacy associations in New York and with NCPA. He pushed for immunization rights for pharmacists in New York and is a strong proponent of enhanced physician/pharmacist collaboration efforts.

Under Fiebelkorn’s guidance, students formulated a proposal that was passed by the Pharmacists Society of the State of New York (PSSNY) House of Delegates and now sits as a bill in both in the New York State Assembly and Senate to allow pharmacy students to immunize under the direction of a pharmacist. Fiebelkorn’s efforts have been recognized with many awards—too many to list in this space. Narrowed down to the most recent, they include the 2014 Bowl of Hygeia Award from PSSNY, the APhA Foundation, and the National Alliance of State Pharmacy Associations; and the 2013 PSSNY Distinguished Pharmacy Educator award.

Perhaps more than anything, Fiebelkorn can be described as an advocate for all things relating to independent pharmacy.



Stacy Fredrick (left) and Laura Bielecki are joined by Fiebelkorn after their second place finish in the Pharmacist Society of the State of New York’s 2016 Business Plan Competition.

“From everything that I have seen in all the years I have been a pharmacist, change comes from the little guys, it comes from the independents; it does not come from the chains,” he says. “The chains don’t wake up one morning and say, ‘Let’s do this.’ It actually comes from some independent somewhere, and the chains are copying it. The chains might do it better at a larger scale, but that does not mean they invented the thing. It is the independent who is thinking out of the box, given their flexibility.”

Fiebelkorn received his first taste of independent pharmacy while growing up in Dunkirk, N.Y., a town some 50 miles southwest of Buffalo situated on Lake Erie. At 14, he landed his first pharmacy job at an independent store, and worked there for six years, including weekends when he started his education at a nearby community college.

After graduating from UBSPPS, Fiebelkorn went to work for an independent in Buffalo for 3-1/2 years, then moved on to Fay’s, a regional chain in western New York, where he stayed for some 16 years in various managerial roles. Western New York has been a hotbed for community pharmacy leadership, and it was during this time that he developed relationships with area independent owners



A glass cabinet on display at the school is what Fiebelkorn calls the “NCPA” shrine, with plaques honoring each of UB’s Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition teams since the schools first competed in 2005.

such as Donald Arthur, his son Brad, and Steve Giroux. Donald Arthur served as NARD (now NCPA) president in 1988-89. Brad Arthur became president last October, thus becoming the first father and son to hold that position in the association’s 118-year history. Fiebelkorn also started working on a part-time basis at UBSPPS as a clinical instructor before joining the faculty full time in December, 1995. Fiebelkorn’s wife Tina is also a pharmacist, specializing in long-term care.

STRESSING CREATIVITY AND REALISM

Being creative and thinking outside the box is something that Fiebelkorn emphasizes with students, but he’s also looking for realistic ideas.

“I ask them, ‘Does this really make sense to you? If you were a patient would you really pay that? Would you come to the pharmacy because of that?’ ” he says. “Sometimes they have blinders on, saying, ‘Oh yeah, absolutely! Yeah!’

Then I say, ‘Think about this now, ask around, and go to your pharmacist and ask him.’ Then they come back a week later and say, ‘No, that’s not going to work.’ I want them to figure things out. I’m not going to give them the answers, they have to learn all of that – balance sheets, income statements, all of those kinds of things. They have to do all the research. I also tell them the idea has to be practical, and it has to be payable. It’s nice to be able to provide a service to help the community, but you still have to pay your bills.”

Another tendency that Fiebelkorn tries to steer student pharmacists away from is simply looking at dollar signs. For example, when he asked students during their pharmacy presentation if they had \$30,000 to invest, in which pharmacy would they invest?

“Some of them say, ‘Oh this is the biggest pharmacy, I’m going to invest in that,’ ” he recalls them saying. “And I tell them that you are putting money into a pharmacy that does \$6 million in revenue a year, and if you only have \$30,000 to invest, so how much do you think you are going to have? You will have about 2 percent of that pharmacy. Contrast that to another pharmacy that is making much, much less because it’s a small place. There are a



RDC Supports Independent Pharmacists Through Fiebelkorn Award

Since 2013, Rochester Drug Cooperative (RDC) has pledged support to aspiring independent pharmacists through the Professor Karl D. Fiebelkorn Award in Independent Pharmacy. The award annually supports two University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences (UBSPPS) PharmD students drawn to independent community practice. Candidates also demonstrate financial need and are active in the NCPA student chapter at the university. RDC has committed \$25,000 to support the awards, named to honor Fiebelkorn, associate dean for student affairs and professional relations, for his advocacy and support of community pharmacists.

"We made this gift to recognize Karl's passionate commitment to independent pharmacies and his longtime success as an outstanding professor," said Larry Doud, RDC president and CEO.

Fiebelkorn said UBSPPS is grateful to RDC, which is a longtime annual supporter of the school's golf tournament and has been "overwhelmingly supportive of our students, especially in regard to the Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition," which UBSPPS has entered since 2005. Lindsey Feuz and Samantha Mattison were the first recipients in the 2013-14 academic year. They were followed by Brian Bowman and Charlie Hinton in 2014-15, and Bowman and Ali Scrimenti in 2015-16.

lot of things you can do and fix, and with \$30,000 you are going to get a bigger chunk of that business."

Fiebelkorn says that it is important to know what is and is not allowed in your state. In some states, immunizations by pharmacists are restricted to the pharmacy, but in New York clinics can be held almost anywhere.

"So we could vaccinate at the airport, or the train station, or set up shop in downtown," he says. "For one competition, a group decided to design a mobile immunization unit in a van. New York State would allow that. They called it 'The Pharm Squad' (a play on 'Geek Squad') and had it on the side of the van. They didn't win, but they came in the top five that year. It was almost like a food truck. People come in, get immunized, and get their blood pressure done. I thought that was a pretty good idea."

Speaking of immunizations, Fiebelkorn and a pharmacy owner friend, Dennis Galluzzo, were among those who helped the push to make it legal for pharmacists to provide them in New York.

"We actually ran the first immunization clinic at his independent pharmacy in February 2009," he says. "The next thing we needed to do was get paid for it. We are not going to just give this away, we are going to justify that, so we went to Independent Health and they paid for it. Then we went to the Blues (Blue Cross/Blue Shield), and they paid for it. Then I worked with four other faculty members who justified payment from Medicaid in New York (state). We received a very good payment from Medicaid. In fact, Medicaid is probably one of the best payers for vaccinations in New York now because reimbursements are so low. So if you are doing a lot of Medicaid immunizations, you are doing very, very well. And Medicaid likes the idea since it keeps patients out of the hospitals."

LEARNING 'SOFT SKILLS'

Along with clinical and financial know-how, Fiebelkorn says budding independent owners need to develop what he calls "soft skills." It's basically the art of engaging with people effectively.

"If you are going to be an independent pharmacist, you have to have very good soft skills, because you are going to be applying for loans, dealing with people constantly on business levels and you need to know how to handle that," he says. "It is even critical when dining out with a client or business associate. Having very good soft skills will take you even further, faster, than anyone else, because people remember that. The PHM 638 course culminates in a professional dinner at a local restaurant where the owner discusses proper business etiquette."

Fiebelkorn cites Arthur as someone with extremely good soft skills. "He comes into the class and talks to them, and the students say 'He's really polished, he's so polite.' My response is, 'He makes a good impression, doesn't he?' And they say 'Yes.' Well, he has great soft skills."

Fiebelkorn says these are all things that have to be learned, whether it's the proper way to write an email, or sending a thank you note. "So we work on those things," he says. "The students become very polished, and I receive feedback from preceptors and business owners saying, 'This student was very impressive.' It turned out that they took my independent course. The students aren't coming out of school opening independent pharmacies, but they probably will 5-10 years from now when their finances are a bit better. And having these skills will definitely help."

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Fiebelkorn knows that many students are interested in owning a pharmacy. He also knows that they are worried about massive student loan debt (sometimes in the \$200,000 range) by the time they graduate. He understands that most graduates will not be in a position to consider ownership immediately. And frankly, he says there is an oversupply of pharmacists coming out of schools, so students are also concerned about finding a job.

In response, Fiebelkorn says they have a number of options. A junior partnership, which typically does not require a heavy upfront capital investment, is one. Another is to start as a staff pharmacist and build a nest egg.

"You can go on and obtain a position at a chain pharmacy and make some money, though they are going to dictate what you need to do," he says. "But if you live simply, you can make a lot of money for a couple of years, and save that for a down payment on an independent, but at the same time, keep notes on everything the chain pharmacy does. You might say, 'That's not a good idea, but this is – how they keep their books, how they do advertising, and then you come out and do it better.'"

Fiebelkorn says that pharmacy is not what it was 30 years ago, when independent stores were trying to compete by selling lawn mowers and the trash cans.

"If you try to compete head on with a chain, you cannot do that," he says. "Chains have this massive buying pow-

er. I said you have to wine and dine people on the service. Everybody now has insurance for prescriptions, everybody pays the same, so you have to knock them dead on the service; that's where the chains are losing."

As an example, Fiebelkorn cited how another independent owner friend of his, Marty Pietruszewski, responded when a Rite-Aid opened across the street from his store.

"He said it was wonderful they were opening there because people will flock to this area because of Rite-Aid," Fiebelkorn says. "He then said they will see me across the street and they will come to me because the Rite-Aid pharmacist is not going to have time for them. I know I can service them better."

Fiebelkorn also points out that many independent pharmacies are becoming smaller. "The newer ones like Dennis Galluzzo owns are small shops," he says. "I don't think his is even 600 square feet. It's just a little professional place, and all he sells are pharmacy items, OTC,

stockings, medical equipment, things like that. He does a pretty robust prescription and immunization business. He has low overhead because he's small, but he's right next to a grocery store. People see him next to the grocery store and walk right in. He also uses sandwich board advertisements outside with information about flu shots and other services. He has a good rapport with the grocery store next door, so everybody at the grocery store shops there, and he does pretty well. He is in a very popular strip plaza, so he has an ideal spot for that business."

The bottom line for Fiebelkorn is to see his students follow their passion in whatever they do.

"I stress to my students that if you really put your mind to something, and you really, really like what you are doing, then you can do it," he says. "Even if you start slow and get crumbs, crumbs can work out to pennies, pennies can work out to dimes, and you just gradually work your way up." ■

Chris Linville is managing editor of *America's Pharmacist*.
