

# Behind Closed Doors: Understanding Barriers to Student Access to Faculty Office Hours

Lesley Sebree, PharmD Candidate

Katherine Newman, PharmD

## Abstract

**Background:** Faculty office hours are intended to provide personalized academic support, yet many students underutilize them due to psychological, logistical, and structural barriers. Intimidation, fear of judgment, low confidence, and uncertainty about appropriate use frequently deter students. These challenges are often intensified for first-generation and underrepresented learners. In pharmacy education, where comprehension of complex, high-stakes content is essential for professional competence, accessible academic support is especially critical. At Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) School of Pharmacy, multiple instructors per course and inconsistent on-campus availability further impede meaningful student-faculty interaction. Although alternative formats such as flexible or virtual office hours have been suggested, little is known about how pharmacy students experience these approaches

**Methods:** This mixed-methods study assessed SIUE pharmacy students' experiences with and perceptions of faculty office hours to identify barriers to office-hour utilization through a 13-item Qualtrics survey designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative responses. P1-P4 students were recruited via email, with a target enrollment of 20-30 participants. IRB approval (IRB #3089) was obtained, and the survey was distributed in December 2025.

**Results:** A total of 39 pharmacy students completed the survey. Nearly half of respondents (45.7%) reported never attending faculty office hours, while 34.8% attended in person and 19.6% attended virtually. Although most students agreed that faculty met their academic needs, comfort levels with approaching faculty varied, and 44% of respondents reported uncertainty about when or how to attend office hours. Qualitative analysis identified several themes influencing utilization, including faculty approachability, student confidence, communication of office-hour availability, scheduling limitations, and student interest in more flexible or structured office-hour formats, such as group review sessions.

**Conclusion:** Faculty office hours remain an important academic support resource within pharmacy education, yet they are often underutilized by students. This study identified key factors influencing student engagement, including perceived faculty approachability, uncertainty about how to use office hours, and scheduling constraints. Increasing scheduling flexibility, offering structured group sessions, and improving communication about office-hours expectations may increase student utilization. Future research should explore additional strategies to enhance accessibility and incorporate faculty perspectives.