



A Monthly Newsletter from ADEA Executive Director Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H.

In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, explores emerging approaches to elevating the role of ethics in dental education.



ADEA is moving ahead to cultivate consensus around the ethics of professionalism.

Giving Professionalism New Meaning

Now that you've rung in the New Year, you might be expecting a traditional look back at the accomplishments of the year that's just passed. Instead I'd like to tell you about a process that will only fully flower in the years ahead. I've watched it germinate among ADEA members in recent times and take root in a series of ADEA meetings held in fall 2007.

As you are no doubt aware, the dental education community is not immune from the ethical challenges that have arisen on campuses across the nation. According to Donald L. McCabe, Professor of Management and Global Business at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 46% of graduate students and 69% of undergraduates across all academic disciplines self-report some form of academic dishonesty. In light of these dramatic findings, educators have been forced to step back and examine business as usual at their institutions. ADEA members have been asking: How can we address issues of academic integrity? How can we restore ethics to their rightful place in dentistry and education? What does it mean to be an ethical dental professional, and how do we model this for our students?

The theme of the 49th Annual ADEA Deans' Conference held this past November in Austin, Texas, says a great deal about how our approach to addressing these concerns departs from past efforts. "Enhancing a Culture of Professionalism in Dentistry" looked well beyond the mechanics of handling cheating and other unethical conduct to explore the core values that define dental education and give them renewed prominence in our understanding of what it means to be dental students, educators, and professionals.

The gathering brought together approximately 160 deans and associate deans of U.S. dental schools along with a variety of other representatives from our community to develop recommendations for integrating ethical decisionmaking and a sense of mission in dental education. Participants heard from a distinguished roster of speakers, including the aforementioned Drs. McCabe and John D. Stobo, President of the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) at Galveston.

When Dr. Stobo became President of UTMB, he says an air of entitlement permeated the campus and motivated a number of behaviors that did not meet the ethical standards he desired for the school. His conference presentation did not offer a single, easy fix, but prescribed a range of interventions: strong leadership, clear and succinctly written policies, a series of meetings with all the stakeholders at the school, and instituting a system of rewards for professional behavior. Ten years after his arrival, a climate of professionalism and accountability characterizes UTMB. This has generated high levels of trust in the administration and halved the rate of faculty turnover.

Dr. Stobo contends that a similar transformation is possible in any department, school, or institution where there is passion and a commitment to change. His presentation resonated with participants at the ADEA Deans' Conference, who on the closing day of the conference sketched out recommendations for enhancing a culture of ethics and professionalism in dental education. Discussions revealed a solid commitment to promoting a deeper understanding of professionalism in an attempt to create an ethos for our field that places ethical behavior and academic integrity at the forefront.

Recommendations put forward at the conference include disseminating best practices for enhancing a culture of professionalism, exploring alternative curricular and assessment models that might reduce the risk of unethical behavior, and the creation of a common code of professionalism for dental education. The Administrative Board of the ADEA Council of Deans has agreed to review these recommendations during their meeting

later this month here in Washington, DC.

The ADEA Fall 2007 Meetings in Nashville brought together the ADEA Councils of Students, Faculties, and Sections and academic affairs deans to take up related concerns under the theme "Professionalism . . . Integrity Within." These meetings revealed a significant gap between professors and their students around ethical issues, further underscoring the importance of meetings like these that bring the two groups together for frank discussion.

Also during the ADEA Fall 2007 Meetings, Prof. Joshua E. Perry from Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Center for Biomedical Ethics and Society, shared his research on the high rate of dissatisfaction among law students. His examination of the relationship between professional satisfaction and ethics led him to conclude that students in a culture that is focused on grades, status, money, and impressing others are more likely to engage in questionable means to attain these ends. Conversely, students in environments that promote cooperation and self awareness are more likely to behave ethically.

These sociological and demographic trends were echoed in a presentation by Dr. Rick Buchanan, Dental Dean at the University at Buffalo, at a separate meeting of ADEA AFASA (Sections on Dental School Admissions Officers and Student Affairs and Financial Aid). He noted that surveys of college students indicate an interest in being financially well-off that doubled from 1966 to 1996 while interest in developing a "meaningful philosophy of life" fell by 50%. He characterized the members of Generation Y as impatient, technology savvy, and possessed of a formidable sense of entitlement and a willingness to challenge authority. In contrast, he described faculty and administrators as fully grasping their obligation to maintain the integrity of the academic environment but hesitant to confront the unethical behaviors they observe.

One practice that stirred considerable interest at the ADEA Deans' Conference will have particular relevance for AFASA members. Dr. Marilyn S. Lantz from the University of Michigan, President-Elect of the American Society for Dental Ethics, described the new admissions process at the University of Michigan School of Dentistry where admissions officers have added multiple mini-interviews (MMI) to their repertoire of assessment techniques. In six to 12 short encounters, prospective students are asked to talk through structured problems, which are designed to reveal the characteristics that faculty value most in their students: critical thinking, ethical decisionmaking, knowledge of the health care system, and effective communication skills.

MMI appears to have the potential to be a valuable approach to assessing these noncognitive abilities and may be a good predictor of clinical performance and ethical behavior. Dr. Lantz would like to see other dental schools use the MMI format. By tracking the outcomes and combining data from multiple programs, it would be possible to assess the reliability of MMI for identifying students who possess attributes that will enhance the culture of professionalism in dentistry.

Dr. Anne Wells, ADEA Associate Executive Director for Educational Pathways, is collaborating with Dr. Lantz on a workshop for admissions staff who want to learn more about implementing the MMI model. Individuals may register for the February 19-20, 2008, workshop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, by emailing Dr. Wells at <mailto:wells@adea.org>. Dr. Lantz will also present information about the MMI at the 2008 ADEA Annual Session in "Rethinking the Admissions Interview—Predicting Clinical Performance and Professionalism in Dental School" on Sunday, March 30.

Even as we move ahead to cultivate consensus within our own profession around these issues, ADEA is collaborating with other associations representing schools of the health professions in an attempt to define those attributes of professionalism that should govern our interactions across the health professions. This effort nurtures a culture that values and fosters individual competence, improves practice and academic environments, and enhances quality health care outcomes for patients. Ultimately, patients are the ones who will benefit from ADEA's cultivation of the ethics of professionalism, which is unmistakably a part of the compassionate care that is synonymous with excellent dentistry.



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