

A Monthly Newsletter from 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, considers ways to diversify the faculty composition at dental schools, which have become increasingly reliant on former practitioners.



Where will we find people with an academic orientation that embraces research, teaching, and service?

Attracting the Right Mix of Dental School Faculty

When I started my academic career in the 1980s, I was in my thirties and most of my colleagues were in their forties and fifties, with older faculty filling out the ranks. A decade later, my colleagues were mostly in their fifties and sixties, and as we moved into the 21st century, the cohort continued to age. Today it seems as if most of the new entrants to academic dentistry come with already dog-eared AARP cards in their wallets.

That's hardly surprising. According to the most recent *ADEA Survey of Vacant Budgeted Faculty Positions*, over the past decade between 46 and 62 percent of new faculty members have come to academic dental institutions from the practice arena. In the [May 2010 Charting Progress](#), I wrote about how dental schools were adjusting to this new breed of faculty and about some of the programs that are in place to help them make the transition to academic life. While their migration to the academy is greatly appreciated, their dominance within the ranks of new hires presents some challenges. Younger people with a strong academic orientation are also needed to keep curricula up-to-date, sustain strong research programs, and develop the policies and practices that will shape our institutions moving forward.

Twenty years ago, the majority of faculty came either from the military or from advanced education programs, bringing with them an academic orientation that embraced research, teaching, and service. Where are these people coming from today? What is being done to recruit them to academic careers?

The [Columbia University College of Dental Medicine](#) is taking a novel approach to cultivating faculty. The school allows dental students to earn a Master of Arts in Dental Education during two summer semesters following their second and third or third and fourth years. Additionally, they take evening courses during their matriculation in the dental school. Students take courses at Columbia's highly regarded Graduate School of Education, better known as Teachers College. According to Dr. Letty Moss-Salentijn, Vice-Dean for Academic Affairs, the program has been very popular, with 12 graduates in the last five years and three currently enrolled. "Many people who are thinking about an academic career, right away or in the future, see it as a good way to get the credentials."

To date Columbia has netted two full-time faculty through the program, and a third will join them after she finishes a residency program. As for the rest, several are completing advanced and Ph.D. programs. Although their plans are not fixed, Letty is encouraged: "I think perhaps 40 or 50 percent are serious about pursuing academic careers."

Identifying and cultivating such students is exactly what the [ADEAGies/American Association for Dental Research Academic Dental Careers Fellowship Program](#) (ADEAGies/AADR AFDCP) is all about. Begun in 2006 with funding from the ADA Foundation, this program connects predoctoral and allied dental students with mentors and immerses them in the faculty experience. Fellows take part in practice teaching in diverse settings, design and implement a research project, explore career pathways and educational philosophy, and conduct a series of interviews with faculty and administrators to get their perspectives on academic dentistry.

Since its inception, the program has funded 39 fellows at 24 different dental schools. The program's impact has yet to be fully gauged. Half the class is still completing predoctoral or advanced education, and information about the employment choices of many of the remaining fellows is still being gathered. That said, at least three fellows are employed as full-time faculty and a fourth as part-time faculty, and the program has received high marks from fellows and mentors alike.

In addition to growing the pool of academically inclined individuals, we also need to think about diversifying that pool. The number of underrepresented minority (URM) faculty has grown over the last decade, mirroring the growth in URM enrollment in dental schools and advanced education programs during this same period. While this is clearly a positive trend overall, the addition of a large number of Hispanics to the faculty ranks masks a less encouraging reality. The numbers of both Native American and African American faculty has remained relatively stable. The hope is that these URM groups will also see a substantial increase in their representation as more of them graduate from dental school and advanced education programs.

Some promising ways to make this happen are detailed in a new ADEA publication, [Growing Our Own: The ADEA Minority Dental Faculty Development Program](#), an initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This publication chronicles the ADEA Minority Dental Faculty Development (ADEA MDFD) program and offers guidance to institutions on leadership for diversity. I urge you to get a hold of this resource and study the experience of institutions like your own. In a nutshell, *Growing Our Own* makes clear that cultivating minority faculty can be achieved through academic and community partnerships, mentoring programs, supplemental training opportunities, and leadership to establish an institutional climate that truly values diversity. While each of the participating schools used its grant funds differently, each made notable strides toward diversifying its faculty.

Of course, many of our schools have long offered the traditional pathway to a faculty career, the Ph.D. degree. More than a dozen dental schools offer a dual degree that allows dental students to integrate clinical and research preparation. The [National Institutes for Dental and Craniofacial Research](#) (NIDCR) has invested heavily in these programs. Its [Institutional Dual Degree Program](#) (D.D.S.-D.M.D./Ph.D.) provides funds to 15 dental schools to support dental students who are motivated to pursue careers in biomedical research and academic dentistry. NIDCR also helps stimulate student interest in research through its [Summer Dental Student Award](#) and the [NIH Clinical Research Training Program](#), which allow predoctoral students to spend a summer or a year participating in research on the campus of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), gaining exposure to the latest advances in oral health. Students can also avail themselves of more modest awards from both [ADEA](#) and the [American Association for Dental Research](#) (AADR), not to mention the opportunities that exist at many of their home institutions.

These programs have a vital role to play in cultivating the kind of faculty we need to retain a strong research enterprise within our institutions. I credit my own exposure to research as a predoctoral student with setting me on the path to an academic career. Unfortunately, many of our schools no longer offer a hospitable environment for dental researchers. This reality was brought home to me recently when I spoke with Dr. Christopher Fox, Executive Director of AADR and its parent association, the International Association for Dental Research. Chris pointed out that a decreasing proportion of NIDCR's extramural funding is going to dental institutions.

"This is a bellwether of where dental science is going," he told me. "Given the NIH's current emphasis on clinical and translational research, dental schools should be ideal recipients for NIDCR grants, but they are receiving less than half of them."

So why are our schools less competitive than in the past? Chris suggests the faculty shortage may be to blame, noting that while the vast majority of D.D.S./Ph.D. holders are entering academia, they quickly become burdened with teaching, academic committee, and other service responsibilities and lack sufficient time for research. He would like new researchers to engage in a postdoctoral experience before they are thrown into a traditional faculty role and, once there, he says, "We need to create protected time for young investigators and give them the proper mentorship, and not assign them to all the other dental school needs."

Which places the ball squarely in our court. As Chris points out, NIDCR is responsible for funding the most promising research being undertaken. In order for more of our institutions to rise to that standard, we will have to make adjustments to accommodate the needs of researchers and attract more research faculty.

Next month, the ADEA Institute for Policy and Advocacy will meet here in Washington to discuss how best to implement our new strategic commitment to supporting the integration of research in the mission of all academic dental institutions. I look forward to sharing the outcomes of that meeting with you.



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