

The future of faculty recruitment: Inspiring students into an academic career

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Abstract

The dilemma surrounding faculty shortages within dental education continues to present significant challenges for the dental profession. There remains a tremendous need to create an effective and sustainable pathway for the recruitment of faculty into dental academia, with an emphasis on the establishment of a more diverse and representative faculty composition. This perspective paper proposes a blueprint to nurture and inspire dental students into academia.

KEYWORDS

dental, dental faculty shortage, faculty, faculty recruitment, faculty retention, women faculty, women's affairs

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Dental faculty paucity

The dilemma surrounding faculty shortages within dental education continues to present significant challenges for the dental profession. Moreover, the dental school faculty shortage places in jeopardy the general and oral health of the public.¹ While many may associate this assessment with work conducted over the past few years, it represents the sobering perspective presented by Haden et al. in 2000.

While the landscape of dental education has changed and evolved in many ways, their cautious sentiments continue to represent the thoughts of many over two decades later. There remains a tremendous need to create an effective and sustainable pathway for the recruitment of faculty into dental academia, with an emphasis on the establishment of a more diverse and representative faculty composition.

The challenge of faculty shortages in dental education is not unique and has parallels in other health professions and countries, each adopting innovative strategies for recruitment. Nursing and medical fields, for instance, have

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leveraged clinical partnerships to engage practicing clinicians in part-time teaching roles.² In pharmacy, there is a focus on nurturing leadership and academic skills early in careers.³ Globally, many countries are experiencing dental faculty shortages with similar barriers.⁴

Data from the American Dental Education Association shows that from 2013 to 2019 the number of dental educators declined by 3.0% (10,711–10,388).⁵ Additionally, between 2016 and 2019 less than 1% (~32) of dental graduates planned to enter a career in academic dentistry.³ The loss of dental faculty has been primarily due to retirement.⁵ Furthermore, the ongoing shortage of oral health educators has been greatly exacerbated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which has accelerated the number of individuals leaving dental academia for retirement or working in private practice. Since the beginning of the pandemic, some reports have estimated more than 300 vacant positions in dental schools across the nation.

1.2 | Barriers to a career in academia

The recruitment of skilled, committed, and motivated individuals to invest in an academic career and teach the next generation of oral health providers is critical for the profession's survival. Despite individual and institutional efforts to engage new faculty in academic dentistry, the numbers remain low. The authors explored the challenges faced by dentists in different stages of their profession to engage in academic dentistry. Poor financial reward, geographical location of universities, lack of educational training, loss of clinical skills, and lack of a clear career pathway were the main drawbacks reported by dentists practicing in private settings.^{7,8} The income discrepancy between academic dentistry and private practice has been highlighted as the first major barrier.⁹ Student indebtedness is another significant driver influencing the career decisions of recent dental and residency graduates. Currently, there is little incentive or availability for residents, who are temporarily serving in teaching positions, to continue these activities following their training. With dental graduates shouldering an average education indebtedness between \$284,000 and \$305,000,^{5,6,10} it is difficult for many graduates to commit to an academic career and properly manage their educational debts.

Outside of the financial barriers that exist for those seeking to enter dental academia, many also report the lack of education degree or equivalent training as a reason to forego an academic career.¹¹ Insufficient training and/or preparation to fulfill the responsibilities associated with a faculty position have been associated with job dissatisfaction, burnout, and a decrease in well-being.¹²

Dental academia, like any other enterprise, has its unique challenges and idiosyncrasies. Other reported factors that dissuade individuals from entering this landscape include working in a large organization, adapting to the organizational culture, and having to report to a manager, rather than being the leader in one's practice. There is also the belief there are perceived pressures in achieving deliverables, such as obtaining grants in a very competitive environment, and publications in high-impact journals. Without a well-organized academic career pathway and effective mentorship programs, achieving a successful and enjoyable academic career is seen as improbable or, for many, unattainable.

1.3 | Efforts used to combat the faculty shortage

The dental profession has been active in developing strategies to address the widespread faculty shortage and minimize the detrimental impact it has on the delivery of dental education, as well as on the services provided to the public. While the recruitment of individuals from private practice and/or the military has helped to meet the teaching requirements of many dental institutions, these recruitment efforts are not without drawbacks. Many of these faculty appointees join at the middle to end of their professional careers, which has several drawbacks including shorter potential educational careers, a general lack of understanding regarding fundamental pedagogy, and inadequate skills to support the effective dissemination of information to student learners. Many dental institutions attempted to recruit highly skilled dental educators from other countries. State board and specialty board regulations made international faculty recruitment extremely challenging. The authors believe that the greatest potential for the recruitment and expansion of the dental faculty resides within the users of the educational system, our students. Many within the dental profession have sought to create opportunities and pathways to encourage dental and advanced dental education students to pursue a career in dental academia.

1.4 | Existing initiatives encouraging the transition from student to faculty

Many dental institutions have some form of faculty development program, but most of those programs are catered to existing faculty. For over two decades, the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) and several dental institutions established initiatives encouraging dental students and residents to pursue academic dental careers

often referred to as “Growing Your Own”. The ADEA Academic Dental Careers Fellowship Program (ADEA ADCFP) was created in 2006 through the collaboration between the ADEA and the Academy for Academic Leadership (AAL).¹³ The program aims to provide dental students with an understanding of academic dentistry through mentorship, training, and career planning.

As mentioned above, another major barrier for dental students to pursue an academic career is the financial burden they carry during their pre-dental and dental training. Scholarships, such as the ADEA/Crest-Oral-B Scholarships for Pre-doctoral Students Pursuing Academic Careers, are also ways to help make the academic career more appealing. However, the scholarships may not be significant enough to offset the financial burden of graduates with larger student loans. Loan repayment programs and loan forgiveness programs have been popular opportunities for faculty seeking to pay off their student loans. Even though loan repayment programs are great opportunities for faculty recruitment and retention, the taxes related to loan repayment programs are still a major burden to junior faculty members. Through the years, many advocacy efforts were made to make loan repayment programs tax-free, but with little success.

ADEA and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation collaborated on an initiative to address the academic pipeline issue. The Minority Dental Faculty Development initiatives sponsored a total of eight individual dental schools, one dental hygiene school, and one consortium of dental schools in New York State. The participating dental schools commit to investing in faculty potentials identified from dental school, offering the coaching, training, and financial support they need with the expectation that they will stay as faculty after the completion of the program. This program addresses knowledge, mentorship, and financial barriers. Unfortunately, funding for this program has ended and has not yet been renewed. One of the major drawbacks of this program is the challenge of identifying potential talents for dental academia. According to the 2021 ADEA Survey of U.S. Dental School Seniors Summary Report, 23% of the surveyed dental school graduates felt that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their career plans.¹⁴ Dental students who were interested in dental academia at the beginning of their training may no longer be interested as they gain a better understanding of the dental industry.

1.5 | Re-imagining the dental academia recruitment model

While various groups and organizations have achieved some success with recruiting students and residents into dental academia and mitigating the ongoing faculty short-

age issue, we believe their efforts have failed to achieve the impact and longevity that the profession desperately needs to truly address the problem. The authors believe that by reframing the topic, as outlined by Gallos and Bolman in their book *Reframing Academic Leadership*,¹⁵ a more inclusive and sustainable solution can be devised by the dental education community. Specifically, by breaking the frame and viewing this problem from a different perspective the faculty shortage challenge and limitations associated with previously utilized solutions can be overcome.

1.6 | Creating strategic sustainability

One key element that is critical to the success of a long-term solution is sustainability. Without the strategic integration of the solution into the very fabric of the dental education landscape, this proposed strategy would be susceptible to a similar fate as previous approaches. To ensure enduring sustainability, a core must be developed to provide ownership, oversight, and financial support. The authors propose the core of a re-imagined Faculty Recruitment Program (FRP) to be composed of 1) the ADEA, 2) a sustainable funding source in the form of an endowment or foundation, and 3) a leadership institute that would provide a core training curriculum. ADEA, as the voice of dental education, would serve as the primary champion of the FRP. ADEA's tremendous experience with faculty development, capacity to plan and execute impactful developmental programming, and broad connection with dental institutions throughout North America, and beyond, make it the perfect entity to provide general oversight for the program. The selected leadership institute should possess the expertise and workforce to help establish a standardized core curriculum that would help inculcate foundational educational principles in all program participants. This group should also possess tremendous experience with coordinating professional development programming which would be important when establishing the logistical components of the FRP. Finally, the funding entity will partner with ADEA and dental institutions. The acquired funding would be used to achieve two primary aims: 1) support the expenses associated with program oversight and 2) provide funds that would offset student loan debt, as prescribed in program contracts. The emphasis should be on the sustainability of the funding source. Many FRPs were established in the past through grants. Most of the programs have since ended as the funding was exhausted. Multiple funding sources, endowments, and financial commitment from the participating dental institutions may be needed to ensure the sustainability of this program. A partnership between these three

organizations would establish a strong foundation and the invaluable sustainability needed to allow this program to take root within dental academia and help develop generations of impactful dental educators.

1.7 | Institutional customizability

While creating a core of partners to ensure the sustainability of this proposed FRP is important, a meaningful connection with dental institutions is paramount to achieving the overall mission of the program. Dental schools across the country have varying missions and visions. Likewise, they have different needs that would require a high degree of customization as they consider the needs of their institution and what faculty additions would best support the work of their schools. The authors envision a program, with the flexibility to allow institutions to craft a supplemental program curriculum. This can be in the form of a certificate program that exists in their parent university, or as a conglomerate of courses that is available at another university in this coalition. If further clinical exposure is needed to help the student transition into the faculty role, this training can also be integrated into this supplemental curriculum. This material would help prepare the recruited faculty to fulfill the roles and/or responsibilities that they will encounter once hired at the institution. It could be additional support in grant writing for a research faculty at a research-intensive institution, strategies to provide effective feedback to students in a clinically focused school, or the utilization of new instructional technologies for a faculty assuming a teaching-focused position. By engaging institutions and providing them with a mechanism to tailor a portion of the training for their potential employee, the school can ensure that the knowledge and skills needed to immediately support the desired component of the school's mission can be achieved. This coalition of dental institutions can also share their training resources, making the faculty recruitment endeavor a collective effort.

1.8 | Faculty recruitment program in action

What would such a faculty recruitment program look like in action? The specifics of the FRP (benefits and expectations) would be presented broadly to dental and advanced specialty students through correspondence from ADEA and the AAL. Interested students would then apply for a program position. Upon acceptance, the students would then initiate the completion of the core and supplemental

program curriculum, garnering the educational knowledge needed to navigate a career in dental academia. As the students navigate the program, they would receive a stipend to offset the cost of their dental education and mitigate one of the primary barriers to remaining in dental academics. After their program, the student would commit to transition into a faculty position at their institution or pursue employment at a different institution within this coalition of dental institutions.

2 | CONCLUSION

By reframing the faculty shortage that continues to confront dental academia, a significant crisis can be re-envisioned as an opportunity for strategic collaboration. By establishing a core group of stakeholders and empowering dental institutions with the ability to support and customize the preparation experience, a sustainable and promising recruitment model could be developed to grow the number of highly trained educators entering the profession.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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