What does the future hold for orthodontic education?

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The American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) plans to augment salaries of full-time faculty members. Will this alone ensure the future of orthodontic education, as we know it today?

The AAO has enhanced its efforts to assist postdoctoral orthodontic programs with recruitment and retention of full-time faculty members by augmenting salaries. The AAO House of Delegates set aside $2 million of the 2006-07 fiscal year budget to fund this program entirely.

Dr. B. Melvin DeSoto, Immediate Past President, stated, “I am gratified that the House of Delegates approved this program. A crisis is brewing. We all know that educators are central to the long-term success of our specialty. However, the pool of orthodontists who are willing to teach is shrinking, and more and more educators are closing in on retirement. In the last year, the AAO surveyed the chairs of postdoctoral orthodontic programs. The majority stated that a lack of sufficient funding for salaries is cause of poor recruitment and retention of full-time faculty. While not a cure-all, this new program will make a career in education more financially rewarding and will serve as a stepping stone for the development of future programs.”

The AAO Board of Trustees will appoint a five-member ad hoc committee to administer and deliver this funding, which will be equally distributed to all U.S.- and Canadian- accredited postdoctoral orthodontic programs that successfully apply. The chair or program director of each department will decide how the funds will be allocated to existing program faculty and/or used for recruiting new faculty. To learn more about this program, review the resolution approved by the House of Delegates.

Over the next year, the AAO Task Force on Recruitment and Retention of Faculty will study the feasibility of developing an alternative approach to orthodontic education, a program to support alumni associations, and alternative faculty practice models.

During the 106th AAO Annual Session, the House of Delegates and the Board of Trustees passed several resolutions specifically for task force responsibilities.

How can postgraduate orthodontic programs promote faculty survival and success?

According to Dr. Richard S. Masella, Executive Professor, Department of Orthodontics, College of Dental Medicine, Nova Southeastern University, “At every academic turn, career opportunity lurks. Many potential and neophyte dental educators follow their passions. Higher education institutions, including dental schools, are giant factories for advancement. Educational growth is explosive and nonstop, especially in the health professions, with all valuable aspects of life, an academic career is not one-way fun journey, but one that has its ups and downs.”

“Ample personal satisfaction awaits the dental educator in helping to accept and educate an ever defeating individual professional interests, and serving as a model of professional conduct. The latter includes the singular opportunity to define professionalism as a caring and humane activity that respects patients and society, and to give something back to community and profession. Another gift is the prospect of discovery that advances science and education and benefits humanity. All lie in the educator’s purview.”

“Given the importance of recruiting and retaining dental faculty, accurate informed consent regarding the dental schoolwork environment is crucial. Awareness of reality minimizes surprise and helps the academic secure a positive outcome” (Masella, R. 2005. Internal Dental School Environmental Factors Promoting Faculty Survival and Success. J Dent Educ. 69(4): 440-445).

Will Internet-based resources replace postgraduate orthodontic faculty?

Three universities and $500,000 from the AAO have implemented an Internet-based Distance Learning Project. This is a collaborative research effort to determine effective methods of interactive Internet-based instruction, including small group educational discussions, for graduate orthodontic programs. This research will utilize advanced network applications available through Internet2®, a more powerful, faster version of the Internet. Using video conferencing and Internet2® network applications, the project will conduct pilot tests on multiple combinations of interactive multi-centers and Internet-based instruction, which will be compared to traditional teaching methods. Project goals include determining the effectiveness of distance learning through seminar-based instruction and on-demand teaching materials.

“The AAO, to its great credit, is interested in helping orthodontic education,” said Dr. Profito, who is highly interested in developing more effective teaching methods and has been conducting research on Internet-based instruction for some time.

“We want to make sure that when we conduct distance-learning seminars, we feel like we are sitting across the table,” said Dr. William England, clinical instructor in orthodontics at the University of Louisville and a member of the AAO Council on Information Technology.

Will surfing the digital highway of knowledge, better known as the Internet, replace mentoring and save the future of orthodontics?

So much for Socratic learning. Fifty years ago, who would have dreamed of an educational transformation that would encourage learning without a teacher or classroom?“Today, the advent of the personal computer and Internet, we are all part of this technological revolution and explosion. This ‘virtual university’ concept extends educational access to the masses as well as through the ‘knowledge industry’ (for-profit higher education institutions). Will orthodontics become part of this virtual learning concept?

Along with this growth, new ethical issues develop that have no precedent...results of which become policy and standards that focus on consequences, duties, and rights.

And let’s face it, what part-time or full-time orthodontic instructor is there for the “most” financial rewards? To the credit of these caring, dedicated and educational saviors, they probably spend more money in gas, tolls and other traveling expenses than they earn teaching, not to mention loss of income from their office.

Not long ago at a White House press conference, a harassed public relations officer responded to a reporter’s tough question with a quick answer; “Hey, that’s history.” By placing an issue in the historical domain marked it as insignificance associated with obsolescence. The term history often time fends off journalists and politicians with regard to events of the past. Everything in this universe has had a past. How can we look to the future without considering the past at the least? “You can’t know where you are going unless you know where you came from” (John F. Kennedy, source unknown). Who can defy these important words?

As I got older, my father got smarter...he insisted that change means growth and progress. What is the future of orthodontic education? Is relying on new technology the best direction? What about the faculty’s pathetic remuneration? What do you think?”

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From the Editor’s Desk

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