Orthodontic education needs ‘fresh young blood’

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Orthodontic education may be in a state of flux with a daunting outlook for the future. Recruitment, retention and increased faculty vacancies of full-time, board-certified faculty members in postgraduate orthodontic programs are issues of critical importance when viewed through the lens of educational leadership and social justice.

Historically, these issues have been emergent problems in dental education since the early 1990s; they have the potential of impacting people, communities and society as well. For more than two decades, orthodontic programs have been losing full-time faculty members without new orthodontists filling their positions. Prior to 1990, there was neither concern for the future of academic orthodontics nor worry that these issues would ever materialize; most postgraduate orthodontic programs were not in short supply of full-time faculty members. However, since the 1990s, increased apprehension for the future of academic orthodontics has surfaced regarding these unfilled position vacancies across the country.

Besides the natural progression of age, sickness or retirement, there are reasons why many seasoned faculty members are leaving aca-
demics for clinical practice; it has to do with money and economics. Newly graduated orthodontists have been groomed to replace older, retiring faculty members but not many choose academia over clinical practice; they have tremendous financial debts from years of education that just about precludes consideration for a career in education.

In addition to, and as a result of, these problems facing the specialty of orthodontics, there are social justice implications of virtue ethics and community obligation that may begin to emerge. The most important of these human rights possibilities include: (a) poorly trained orthodontic graduates who may not serve the public with the expertise that is expected, (b) reduced dental services currently provided to the community from dental school clinics and off-campus outreach facilities, and (c) diminished health care for individuals who rely upon universities and hospitals for their personal medical and dental needs.

Orthodontic education is in need of addressing full-time faculty shortages with ‘fresh young blood’—it is a dilemma that resonates with inadequacies and consequences. Student financial obligations make it difficult, if not impossible, to attract young doctors to consider a career in education; the salary differential alone makes academia a non-competitive issue with clinical practice taking into consideration debt service, starting a family, beginning life after school, etc.

Support of the specialty is at stake. Transformative thinking and decision-making is most important for safeguarding tomorrow’s orthodontists and orthodontic leaders. The AAO leadership is taking the attitude of “fire them—seize the day—and making the changes that are necessary for reducing full-time faculty vacancy positions.

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When education and research can become a reasonable choice to compete with clinical practice as a career option, the specialty will maintain its high standards. In addition, it is expected that orthodontists and orthodontic leaders.

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