

## Guest Editorial

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# A Young Faculty Member's Perspective of Academic Prosthodontics

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RECENTLY, an undergraduate student interviewed me about my career as a part of a class he was taking—Introduction to Health Professions. He was planning to apply to dental school and was interested in an academic dental career. One question he asked was particularly intriguing: “What do you think about the current status and the future of academic prosthodontists?” I found myself contemplating this question over and over for the next few weeks. I answered him after a long conversation about the future of academic dentistry and the future of the specialty of prosthodontics. Here is a portion of what I relayed to him.

The current status of academic dentistry is not very bright, but perhaps stable. Less than 1% of DDS graduates actually pursue careers in academic dentistry.<sup>1</sup> The percentage is very low compared with our next door neighbor, The School of Medicine, where a much higher percentage of MD graduates choose academic careers after finishing their residency or fellowships.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this very low percentage of academic interest among predoctoral dental students is alarming when we consider that over 50% of the current dental school faculty are 50 years or older and 20% are 60 years or older. It is projected that we will have about 900 more open faculty positions in the next decade.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, just over half of our prosthodontic residents are international students<sup>4</sup>—and most will go back to their home countries after their training concludes. Our Department of Prosthodontics at UNC recently lost three full-time faculty members, one who retired and two who left academics to pursue careers in private practice. In the United States in 2006 (the most recent year for which data are available), it is estimated that there were over 380 open dental faculty positions.<sup>5</sup> The real question is whether the 1% of DDS graduates who are willing to consider becoming faculty is sufficient to fill the vacant positions. The simple answer is “No.” Prosthodontic faculty positions are some of the hardest po-

sitions to fill. Alarming, when compared with other specialties, prosthodontic faculty positions are the positions most often eliminated by the university due to the extended length of time that the position goes unfilled.<sup>6</sup>

While the future of academic dentistry is gloomy, the future of private dentistry, and especially the practice of prosthodontics, is booming. The baby-boomers are now retiring, and they are spending their retirement money on their teeth! On average, a private prosthodontist makes approximately \$250,000 a year.<sup>7</sup> A general dentist makes a yearly salary of just under \$180,000.<sup>8</sup> The booming trend of private prosthodontic practice appears to be a huge barrier for both recruitment and retention of prosthodontic faculty.

All things considered, have we done enough to prepare our specialty for the future? Have we done anything to create a friendly environment for the new academician? In the near future, how can we train sufficient numbers of clinically competent prosthodontists when we are so severely lacking qualified faculty? What will keep young students interested in an academic career? I believe there are three issues we as a specialty must face.

First, faculty salaries are too low. On average, entry level faculty salaries start at about \$75,000 per year—about \$100,000 per year less than a general dentist and almost \$200,000 less than the average prosthodontist in private practice. We would be fooling ourselves to say professors are devoted individuals for whom money is not an issue. Look again to the School of Medicine—for them, the discrepancy of faculty salary and private practice is far less than \$200,000 a year. We must develop a competitive incentive plan that would make the salary of faculty comparable to private practice. Many schools have incorporated a private practice to help solve this problem; however, in the past decade, the discrepancy between academic salaries and private practice net income has increased.

Second, in most dental schools there is little or no mentoring system for DDS/graduate students who are interested in pursuing an academic career. We need to identify faculty candidates early in order to find financial incentives or compensation (e.g., offering stipends, reduced tuition, or student loan repayment programs) in exchange for a repayment plan of several years of teaching. We also need to follow and mentor these candidates from predoctoral DDS students to graduate students to junior faculty. Throughout my academic career, I have been very lucky to always have had at least two or three great mentors at a time.

Finally, the shortage of trained prosthodontic faculty often tempts us to solve our short-term problem by adding only general dentist part-time clinicians in prosthodontic departments. This neglects the long-term problem. In a study group in our institution a few years ago, the question of faculty shortage was raised by the students involved. One student simply said “Big deal—we just need a warm body to cover our clinics!” Sadly, some of our own faculty members think the same way. “We don’t really need any PhDs or researchers to teach. We just need someone to teach in the preclinical labs and in the clinics.” Do we just need “warm bodies” to teach our future dentists/prosthodontists? Luckily, many qualified prosthodontists prefer part-time teaching. While in preclinical and clinical teaching at the DDS level, we can at least in part rely on part-time faculty; it is difficult to develop strong research programs without a highly competent full-time faculty. We need to embrace diversity in academics beyond race, gender, or nationality—the real diversity is in the qualification of faculty composing the department. If you believe in the “natural selection” theory of evolution, diversity is the main survival character of a species. To ensure a brighter future, academic prosthodontists therefore need to foster this diversity. As a profession, or as a specialty, we will not survive with a “warm body” or a “cookie-cutter” culture.

One of the main reasons I remain in academics is that we embrace such diversity. Our department

is composed of pure clinicians, basic scientists, and clinical researchers, as well as hybrids. I consider myself a hybrid clinician/basic scientist. I was trained as a prosthodontist as well as a protein crystallographer. I am certain there are not many places in the world where I could practice both disciplines simultaneously. I told the student at the end of our interview that I am sure I will remain in academic prosthodontic dentistry for a long while—at least until I can be a part of the solution to solve our faculty shortage problem.

I asked him if he was still interested in academic dentistry. He smiled and said, “We’ll see!” I hope we will.

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