

On Transitioning from Private Practice to Academics

I'm faced with the same dilemma as many of my dental dean colleagues—vacant full-time faculty positions, a dwindling number of highly qualified prospects for these positions, and keen competition from 58 other schools of dentistry (and 10 to 15 projected new schools in the next decade) for an ever-shrinking cadre of highly trained faculty. While some schools have taken the tact of recruiting faculty from other academic institutions, isn't that really "robbing Peter to pay Paul"?

Estimates exist in the US alone of 250 to 350 full-time, vacant faculty positions. The good news is this number is down from the 400 open positions we heard so much about a mere six years ago; the bad news is many of those unfilled positions were eliminated in both state and private dental school budgets reductions, many after remaining unfilled for periods up to 2 years or longer. Interestingly, the number of dental students being trained in the US continues to rise annually. The real question, then, is who's educating our youth, our clinicians of tomorrow, and where will the next generation of highly trained faculty come from?

In the nine months I've been a dean, I've sat through nearly a dozen interviews and presentations from a myriad of faculty candidates for multiple open faculty positions in several departments, and, I've noted an interesting trend—I've seen an increasing number of former alumni, late in their careers, looking for a "new career opportunity" in academic dentistry at their old alma mater. It's been interesting—we've interviewed clinicians with what appears to be very good clinical skills, who have been practicing many years (thus bringing a wealth of clinical knowledge and experience), and who have been financially very successful as a result of their predoctoral education at their alma mater, and who have enhanced their skills through years of clinical experience and annual Continuing Dental Education. However, while private dental practice is a challenging (albeit rewarding) career, comparing it to a full-time academic career is like comparing apples to oranges. I know of few of our applicants who have practiced more than 4 days per week, and one was practicing 2 days per week—all were applying for full-time (yes, that's 5 days per week) positions. With current shortages in most academic dental institutions, I honestly haven't had a 5-day a week schedule in decades!

Academic dentistry is about as close to a 24/7 career as one can get, and, I'm sorry, but it takes a lot of effort to actually TEACH the novice dental student to be a capable, competent clinician. It's so much more than just teaching someone how to run a handpiece or restore a tooth. Those days are long gone! And, the educational experts tell me that the average undergraduate student has the attention span of about 10 to 15 minutes before their eyes glass over, and they tune you out completely. To address this, there's now a big push for "microburst" learning, where you actually have about 10 minutes to actually teach (or is it, entertain?) students before their multitasking skills have them off to something new, more exciting, and more en-

tertaining than your seminar. And, I've heard the other side of the coin from my faculty, both here, at UNC, and around the country—"But, wait a minute, I put in over 20 hours on my 50 minute PowerPoint lecture—what do you mean the students are not listening, or aren't learning?" Or, from the clinical faculty to the student who arrives unprepared to clinic—"Who taught you about this particular prosthodontics procedure in your preclinical course, Doctor? What do you mean you never were taught this? Perhaps, you've simply forgotten it? I *know* you were taught it, because I gave the *\$#@! lecture to your class!" And, if you haven't checked out the YouTube video on dentistry, here's the link—it's frighteningly realistic for some of the students we teach! Simply Google "YouTube Dental Student and Faculty," and click on the link for "3rd year Dental Student vs Faculty—YouTube."

Now, we're all creatures of habit, aren't we? I mean, after all, we ARE Prosthodontists, the most anally retentive group out there! Can you imagine having us take the *hundreds* of PowerPoint presentations we have developed over the past decades, restructuring them into microburst mini-lectures of 10 to 15 minutes duration, *and* having to make them entertaining (the "gaming" concept in education) with imbedded videos, games, positive and immediate feedback, and the like? Do many (or any) of us have the skills to pull this off, not to mention the time to do so? Your 20 hours of prep for the single 50-minute seminar just took 100 hours as you broke it into five 10-minute microburst video seminars! Do you honestly believe our alumni colleagues, who've been chairside for decades, who are applying for our open faculty positions, have those skills? While I'm most appreciative of our alumni desiring to "give back" to their alma mater by either donating time as part-time adjunct faculty, or retiring from private practice to become full-time faculty members, I simply ask that they *please* take a moment to fully understand what you're getting into! Teaching today's student is one of the most challenging, time consuming, and demanding occupations I know of! And, you'll need a ton of patience to deal with today's student. We do *not* teach today's student in the same manner that we were taught 20 to 30 years ago—they learn differently, at a different pace, and are more highly skilled in multitasking and electronic learning that we can possibly imagine. While incredibly challenging, academic dentistry is one of the greatest, and one of the most rewarding careers—*ever*! So, to all you "wannabe" faculty out there, I strongly encourage you to give back to your institution, and take the plunge to teach the next generation of aspiring dentists; but, be ready to learn new educational methodologies, new technical innovations, and new coping mechanisms—you'll need them all to be successful!

David A. Felton, DDS, MS, FACP
Editor-in-Chief

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