Information Transfer—The Missing Step

In order to keep current, contribute to their field, and learn the latest research and educational techniques, dental school faculty need to attend professional development meetings. The Institute of Medicine’s Report on Dental Education discussed the need for faculty development and the infrastructure needs relative to this.1

Meetings are a very effective way to disseminate information to large groups. For many dental schools the faculty travel budget can equal the salary of two or more full-time faculty positions. Because of the cost and high demand, travel funding usually has to be rationed, so it is incumbent on schools to maximize the benefits of this funded travel.

The purpose of a professional meeting is the dissemination of knowledge, but, remarkably, this process seems to stop at the meeting. Dental schools could get significant added value for their travel expenditure if they had a system in place that encouraged meeting participants to share new information gained from recent professional meetings with other faculty. The school could set aside a one- or two-hour period each month for faculty members to give short presentations/discussions on what they learned or found interesting at the meeting they attended. It would be reasonable for faculty members for whom the school was paying full travel expenses to be willing to give such a presentation. Knowing they would be expected to report on what they learned could also encourage faculty traveling to a meeting to be even more attentive to the scientific programs offered and to internalize a portion of it. It would also be reasonable to expect other faculty to attend these presentations. This type of debriefing is commonly done in industry.

A discussion time set aside each month would have many advantages. The faculty in the audience could learn something of value relative to their research or teaching activities. These discussions could stimulate interactions and collaborations of faculty from different departments and, at a minimum, expose them to other areas of research. Exposure to clinical information would decrease the lag time on the use of new techniques in the teaching programs. Professional meetings focusing on dental education can lead to benchmarking successful procedures from other institutions, and the subsequent discussions can help develop an interest in change within the faculty.

These meetings should be opened to students as well. These interactions could stimulate students’ appreciation of research and the value of continuing education. Observing these discussions might stimulate a student’s interest in pursuing a career in research and education.

These meetings could also be a source of continuing education if opened to other dentists from the community. Doing so could be a way of educating part-time faculty and could stimulate dentists in private practice to become full- or part-time faculty. Opening these professional development meetings to community dentists could at the very least increase support of the dental school among alumni and other local dentists.

The dissemination of information learned from professional meetings entails no added cost to the school. It is an economical way of allowing all faculty to benefit from the funds devoted to travel, instead of just the person doing the traveling. By enhancing the value of faculty travel, the administration may even be able to justify greater travel expenditures.

This process adds dynamism to the institution and facilitates communication and cooperation, while giving the school a more collegial atmosphere. It causes the dental school to be more focused on its missions of education and research. Higher education should be the leader in information transfer, since that is what it does.

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