Making Academic Dentistry More Attractive to New Teacher-Scholars

Cathy A. Trower, Ph.D.

Abstract: This perspectives article written under the sponsorship of the Commission on Change and Innovation in Dental Education (CCI) of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) summarizes data on the numbers of women and persons of color earning the D.D.S./D.M.D. degrees and entering the U.S. dentistry profession in the first decade of the twenty-first century and examines job factors of importance to recent graduates of doctoral programs in other academic disciplines that may have relevance for planning recruitment and retention strategies within academic dentistry. The characteristics and expectations of Generation X faculty are explored: who are they and what do they want from the academic workplace? The article describes the culture clash that often occurs when Gen Xers encounter policies and practices that were designed by and for prior generations (e.g., Traditionalists and Boomers) who filled the ranks of dental school faculty in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Recommendations for rethinking academic employment systems in ways that might make the university workplace more attractive to Generation X are described.

Dr. Trower is Co-Principal Investigator, Collaborative On Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE), Harvard University, Graduate School of Education. Direct correspondence and requests for reprints to her at Harvard University, Graduate School of Education, 8 Story Street, 5th Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138; 617-496-9344 phone; 617-496-9350 fax; trowerca@gse.harvard.edu.

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Key words: dental education, dental faculty, faculty development, academic careers, Gen X, diversity

The dental profession in the United States was almost exclusively male until the mid-1970s. In 1970, women were slightly less than 2 percent of the entering class; in 1984, 25 percent of the students were women. It was during this time period that openly hostile attitudes toward women were ameliorated. As described by Sinkford et al., those attitudes were the “stereotypes that characterized women as emotional, undependable, distracting, flighty, lacking in physical strength, undesirable because they are likely to get pregnant, and somehow less capable than males of practicing dentistry.”

Over the last three decades, the number of U.S. women dental students has steadily increased from 1.4 percent in 1970 to 40 percent in 2000. In 2000, women comprised 33 percent of advanced enrollment and 37.5 percent of dental graduates, but only 15 percent of active dentists. The number of women in full- and part-time faculty positions has also increased over this period. Women were 25 percent of the full-time and 30 percent of the part-time dental faculty in 2000. Eighteen percent (ten) of dental schools now have women deans.

In contrast to the numbers of women in dentistry, the enrollment of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans remains low, standing at 12 percent in 2004—lower than the percentage in 1987 through 1996. In spite of some recent increases, the percentage of underrepresented minority dental student enrollments from each group remains significantly lower than the percentage of each group in the U.S. population.

At the fifty-six U.S. dental schools, between the 1990s and 2000, the number of vacant budgeted faculty positions increased over 50 percent, from 238 to 358 vacant positions. Since then, there has been a downward trend to 275 in 2004-05. Importantly, a significant proportion of dental school faculty is
over the age of fifty and, as observed by Schenkein and Best, departures for retirements alone are likely to deplete the ranks.\(^4\)

Some of the shortfall is being made up by utilizing part-time faculty, redistributing teaching loads, dividing duties, and providing interdisciplinary coverage, including the use of generalists to teach in specialty areas.\(^3\) However, “little is being done to encourage young dentists to consider academic careers.”\(^4\)

These trends are likely to continue for several reasons: the pay gap between private practice and faculty continues to grow, student debt affects postgraduate education opportunities, dental faculty retirements will likely accelerate, parent institutions will expect higher levels of scholarship, and further budget cuts may further exacerbate the situation.\(^2\)

The dental school faculty is currently comprised of 52 percent part-time faculty, 74 percent males, 78 percent whites, with a median age of fifty-two (25 percent are over age sixty). Seventy-four percent are clinical, non-tenure track faculty. As illustrated by Figure 1, we also know where they’re coming from and where they go when they leave. Most come from private practice and most leave for private practice.\(^5\)

In 2004-05, 61 percent of new faculty came directly from private practice. Many of these new recruits are older individuals who are joining academia after a twenty-five to thirty-year private practice career; in most instances, they have had little contact with university life. In most cases, as a result, these individuals have little knowledge of the culture, structure, policies, procedures, and general expectations of the academic environment.

In short, colleges of dentistry and the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) face similar challenges to those that confront the nation’s medical schools and research universities: how to recruit and retain a sustainable, diverse workforce to meet future demand. For many reasons, it has become increasingly important to know what job factors attract or repel potential faculty. The next section moves from speaking specifically about faculty issues in dental schools to speaking more broadly about young academics.

### Job Factors Important for Academic Career Planning

In 2001, the Project on Faculty Appointments\(^6\) at Harvard University conducted a study that measured...
the importance of nineteen job factors to recent graduates of doctoral degree programs who were planning an academic career. We learned that the top five job factors were 1) institutional support for research; 2) time for family/personal obligations; 3) quality of the department; 4) teaching load; and 5) flexibility of the work schedule. I don’t know about you, but it’s difficult for me to imagine my father saying he needed time for family and a flexible work schedule.

Part of the difference is not just generational but also because those receiving doctoral degrees are no longer only white males. Students of color placed significantly more importance than white students on institutional support for research, the match between one’s research interests and those of others in the department, the opportunity to work with a leader in the field, and job security. Females put significantly more importance than males on the flexibility of the work schedule, time for family/personal obligations, employment opportunities for spouse/partner, teaching load, and the geographic location of the institution. Males felt that the opportunity for recognition, the quality of the department, the quality of the institution, the opportunity to work with a leader in one’s field, and the quality of students were the most important considerations for academic career planning.

Ultimately, this research showed that the primary considerations of recent doctoral program graduates in choosing an academic position were finding an institution where they could do meaningful work and strike a balance between teaching and research, live comfortably (e.g., affordable housing, decent commute, good schools for children, a sense of community, safety, job opportunities for spouse/partner), and experience quality of life on the job and outside of work—that is, finding a sense of colleagueship within academia but also, and critically, a semblance of balance between work and home. These expectations for work-life represent a tall order to fill at many U.S. research universities and colleges of dentistry, but this strong desire for balance is characteristic of the so-called Generation X who in large part will become the faculty of the future in many areas of higher education including academic dentistry.

**Generation X**

Who are the members of this generation, and what do they want? Gen Xers were born between 1965 and 1980, and if there’s one adjective that characterizes this generation, it’s “skeptical.” This was the latch-key generation whose parents divorced and/or whose moms worked outside the home. This makes them independent, adaptable, and resilient. They don’t want anyone looking over their shoulder at work. They believe their parents suffer VDD—vacation deficit disorder. They want balance now, not when they’re sixty-five. These two quotes sum up the thinking: “If they can’t understand that I want a kick-ass career and a kick-ass life, I don’t want to work here”; and “Why does it matter when I come and go as long as I get the work done?” Can you imagine saying that to your department chair or dean? Don’t get me wrong, Gen Xers are hard workers, but they want to decide when, where, and how. This can be quite unsettling!

Table 1 demonstrates some of the key workplace factors, perceptions, and goals that distinguish the generations at work, according to birth year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chain of command</th>
<th>Change of command</th>
<th>Self-command</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build a legacy</td>
<td>Build a stellar career</td>
<td>Collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction of a job well done</td>
<td>Money, title, recognition, corner office</td>
<td>Build a portable career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If we give in to demands for flexibility, who will do the work?</td>
<td>I can’t believe the nerve of those Xers; they want it all!</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job changing carries a stigma.</td>
<td>Job changing puts you behind.</td>
<td>I’ll go where I can find the lifestyle I’m seeking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I’m not yelling at you, you’re doing fine.</td>
<td>Feedback once a year, well documented</td>
<td>Job changing is necessary.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sorry to interrupt again, but how am I doing?</td>
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**Table 1. The generations at work, according to birth year**

Unfortunately there are few multidisciplinary outlets that are traditionally centered in a discipline, and problem-centered research rather than explore is detached. New scholars want to do multidisciplinary research where the researcher is supposed to be completely detached. What he or she studies but find an assumptive world that people in power valorize the norms necessary for publication, which is a source of frustration for the Gen X researcher.

Third, there is a clash around merit. The embedded view positions merit as being empirically determined and objectively derived. For each discipline, there are and, indeed must be, absolute standards of quality that are uniformly applied. We must treat all faculty equally. Any considerations other than merit are, by definition, extraneous. In research, merit means theoretical work organized around a discipline to advance the discipline that appears in the premier refereed journals of the discipline. The emergent view of many young scholars perceives merit as a socially constructed, subjective concept. Quality and merit are relative notions, inevitably conditioned by personal experience and tacit bias. The new generation cites, for example, studies indicating that peer assessments of identical resumes and identical research differ markedly as a function of the gender-specific name assigned to the material under review. The emergent view contends that conventional definitions of merit do not prevail when they are examined on their own merits. Instead, new Gen X scholars tend to believe that people in power valorize the norms necessary to remain in power.

Finally, there is an embedded assumption among Traditionalist and Boomer faculty that, at the end of the day, or certainly at the end of the probationary period, the quality and quantity of scholarly research matter most. Internal reviews and external markets properly place the heaviest weight on the most important and most difficult task—academic research. Scholarly output historically separated the men from the boys and now separates the most meritorious from the least. However, the emerging view of the rising Gen X faculty is that teaching, advising, and service to the campus, the community, and the profession all matter equally, along with research. The value of these activities should not be discounted because they are more nurturing, less visible, not easily documented, or disproportionately assigned to women and faculty of color. For Gen Xers, citizenship in the academic community should mean more than self-investment, self-advancement, and free agency.

There is a prevailing belief that serious, successful scholars make difficult choices and substantial sacrifices that typically place professional priorities above personal needs. Relationships, marriages, families, and recreation, at least in the short run, have to occupy a distant second place. The embedded view basically separates work and family; by and large,
personal circumstances are irrelevant. In a zero-sum game, more time dedicated to family means less time devoted to career.

The emergent view, however, is that overall quality of life matters a lot and is a critical component of an individual’s personal sense of satisfaction. Gen Xers recognize that it may not be possible to “have it all,” but this generation seeks more than professional achievement. Gen Xers believe that home life and work life should be harmonized and not counterposed. The days of stay-at-home spouses have been replaced by dual-career families. The emergent view insists that personal life matters and that a balanced life should not be incompatible with an academic career. If academic success requires eighty-hour work weeks, then Gen Xers contend that we have misconceptualized what should constitute success. The emergent view contends that institutions should adapt to the needs of faculty, not vice versa.

The last items listed here overarch the others: how do we balance autonomy, which almost all faculty value highly, with our collective responsibility? This cultural clash, in part, has led to a great deal of ambivalence about tenure: is it archery in the dark, or is it, as Mark Twain said of Wagner’s music, “not as bad as it sounds”?

In closing, it is my belief that higher education in general and academic dentistry in particular will not be able to attract the best and brightest women and men of all races and ethnicities to the faculty if we do not pay attention to the values of new scholars, if we fail to change our tenure and promotion policies and practices to keep pace with the times and the evolving cultural expectations of our society, and, most critically, if we are unable to shed the straightjacket of past concepts about academic careers, but continue to insist that one size fits all.

I’d like to close with a quote from the Wall Street Journal of November 2, 1992: “The Roman Catholic Church conceded, after 359 years, that it was wrong to have condemned the Italian scientist Galileo for asserting that the Earth orbits the sun. Pope John Paul II, on Saturday, accepted the findings of a panel that studied the case.” I hope we can act faster than that!

REFERENCES