ADEA President-Elect’s Address

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This address by the 2008–09 President-Elect of the American Dental Education Association was presented to the membership on March 14, 2009, at the 86th ADEA Annual Session and Exhibition in Phoenix, AZ. Dr. Hunt is Dean and Harry Lyons Professor, School of Dentistry, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Thirty-three years ago at the University of Iowa, a senior dental student asked his new clinical instructor why he’d been given a low daily grade. The teacher said, “Because you seemed poorly prepared and unsure of what to do. You asked so many questions.” To this, the student replied, “Okay, then I’ll stop asking questions.” Today that student is a well-respected dentist in Dubuque County, Iowa, and the teacher is the Dean at the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Dentistry and about to become the President of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA).

That teacher, of course, is me. As I reflected on the opportunity that awaits me as ADEA President, I realized how far I have come since that awkward start in dental education. As I learned about dental education throughout my academic career and in my years of engagement in this association, I learned important lessons about teaching and learning, collaboration and partnerships, and searching for answers by asking questions. I look forward to learning even more as I assume the responsibilities of the Association’s highest elected office later in this meeting. I will eagerly accept the responsibilities of this important position.

The Strength of ADEA

I can tell you the association we know as ADEA is extraordinarily strong and sound. It enjoys dedicated and visionary leadership in its elected leaders, including all of you here today, and its staff in the Association office in downtown Washington, DC.

Although our nation, and indeed the entire globe, struggles with an unstable and downsizing economy, the Association’s financial position remains sound. Because of the many revenue streams the Association has built, we are not forced to rely on individual membership dues, making Open Membership possible. This situation is unique among professional associations.

Consequently, we have over 17,500 individual members, in addition to our many institutional members at dental schools, allied dental education programs, hospitals, and advanced education programs. We also have a steadily growing number of corporate members. Many of our sister associations fear the loss of membership with the downturn in the economy, as their members make tough choices about where to invest their dwindling resources. Our members, however, do not face such a dilemma.

Because of our talented leaders, members, and staff, ADEA has become “The Voice of Dental Education.” Faculty members and students in its member institutions, leaders of other professional associations, colleagues in the dental practice community, and legislative leaders and aides look to ADEA for advice, guidance, and ideas about policy and advocacy for dental education and oral health.

On this strong foundation, I now stand ready to step into the role of the President of the American Dental Education Association. Because I am stepping into the presidency of a strong, healthy, and vibrant association, I have the opportunity to lead our Association to even greater strength, and provide even greater value to members. It is an exciting opportunity for me personally and professionally.

The Year Ahead

My hopes, aspirations, and priorities for the year ahead as ADEA President reflect a desire to serve and a willingness to keep learning. I will strive to build on the strength of ADEA. The continued vitality, impact, and value of the Association demand no less, and its members deserve it. I look forward to working with other elected leaders, with Rick Valachovic as the visible and visionary Executive
Director, Abigail Gorman as the multitalented Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer, the Associate Executive Directors, and all the other ADEA staff in maintaining and enhancing the strength of the Association.

I look forward to being the spokesperson for ADEA at our conferences, the meetings of other organizations, and wherever a spokesperson is needed. Speaking on behalf of the Association is one of the primary roles of its President, and the ADEA presidency provides an opportunity to use its bully pulpit to promote high-quality dental education for students and access to optimum oral health for all.

Our work within ADEA keeps it strong and vital, but we need to look outside the organization too. Rick Valachovic often talks about “the relentless pursuit of strategic partnerships.” One of ADEA’s many strengths is its ability to forge successful partnerships with other organizations. But forging a successful partnership with the American Dental Association (ADA) remains elusive. This year presents an interesting and unique opportunity, however, to foster, nurture, and grow that partnership.

In a recent article in the VCU School of Dentistry’s magazine, we called this opportunity “The Tale of Two Rons.” Two dentists, both Virginians, who have been friends for over ten years, two Presidents, both named Ron. Ron Tankersley will become President of ADEA. Ron Hunt will become President of the ADA. We have each pledged to bring our organizations together. We are proposing twice a year meetings of the principal officers of the two associations, which could lead to an unprecedented level of understanding and collaboration. In addition, we propose to cohost a summit later this year on workforce strategies. With keen interest in both association boards, I am confident the Ron partnership can lead to a long-overdue, strengthened ADEA–ADA partnership.

The ADEA CCI

My highest priority during my year as ADEA President will be to promote the work of the ADEA Commission on Change and Innovation in Dental Education, commonly known as the ADEA CCI. I am privileged to be a member of this important commission. I consider the ADEA CCI a think tank for dental education. It draws its strength from its diverse, visionary, and inclusionary membership. In addition to members representing dental schools, allied dental education programs, and advanced dental education programs, it includes members from many sister organizations as well. With ADEA CCI initiatives, new instructors have support and guidance in developing their skills as teachers and encouragement for learning at all stages of their professional journeys.

Already the ADEA CCI has successfully promoted curriculum reform in some member schools. Reforms such as compressing the curriculum, integrating more participatory classroom activities, and stimulating more critical thinking can lead to the highest quality dental education possible. The ADEA CCI has created a large group of liaisons representing over fifty dental schools and provides workshops for the liaisons on strategies for improving education methods at their home institutions.

Over the last several years, the ADEA CCI commissioned twenty-two papers that provide advice, ideas, and philosophies for improving dental education. Originally published in the Journal of Dental Education, these papers are now compiled into a single volume for ease of use and reference. The official release of the volume is at this meeting. Every liaison will receive a complimentary copy. Others may purchase a copy during this meeting in the ADEA bookstore near the registration area. I encourage you to examine the papers, whether through the journal articles (available online or in the printed issues) or in the published volume. They contain a wealth of valuable information about teaching and learning in dental education, as well as offering insight into the challenges educators face daily and promoting and encouraging professional growth.

To me, a particularly important paper in this series was one in which the ADEA CCI presented eight principles for dental education; these included critical thinking, active learning, evidence-based practice, and assessment. These principles explore ways of dealing with the coming changes in dental practice. Our member programs do a good job of preparing graduates for the dental practice of today. But in my opinion, most of them, including my own dental school at VCU, do a poor job of preparing graduates for the practice of the future. To teach graduates how to cope with the profound changes they will face, using ADEA CCI principles is paramount, especially the skills of critical thinking and assessment. We must do a better job of helping students learn these skills. We must do a better job of preparing graduates for the unknown, undiscovered future.

For as much as dental practice has changed in the thirty-three years since I began as a clinical instructor at the University of Iowa, it will change
exponentially more in the coming decades. Most of the greatest changes in dental practice in the past few decades have come from new technology, such as bonding systems, impression materials, implants, digital radiography, rotary endodontics, new drugs, paperless records, and cosmetic dentistry. They all were driven by manufacturers and the marketplace, not science.

Scientists sometimes evaluated these new technologies, but they didn’t generate them. These types of changes will continue, also driven by manufacturers and the marketplace. But the most profound changes will come from scientific discovery. Discoveries will come through the science of genomics and proteomics, molecular probing, gene diagnostics, gene therapy, and tissue bioengineering. There will be many undiscovered, unimaginable advances. Therefore, we must do a better job of preparing graduates for this undiscovered future.

In another important achievement, the ADEA CCI’s efforts to incorporate the eight principles of dental education into dental accreditation standards has led to the development of proposed changes in the Commission on Dental Accreditation standards for dental education programs.

All eight principles are important, but the CCI principle that I find especially important is assessment. As educators we need to discover more effective methods of assessment. To encourage their discovery, I am pleased to report that the ADEA Annual Session Planning Committee adopted my suggestion that the theme for the 2010 ADEA Annual Session in Washington, DC, be focused on assessment. The theme of the meeting will be “Assessment: Portraits of Change.” I anticipate a large amount of programming on both formative and summative assessment. I anticipate programming on assessment of applicants for admission to programs, assessment of students for advancement and graduation, and assessment of faculty members for annual performance reviews or promotion and tenure.

My Request

The American Dental Education Association is a vibrant, active association that brings great value to members on many different fronts. I look forward to working with its members, especially the elected officers, the council administrative boards, the advisory committees, and the staff to maintain and build on its many strengths. We seek to help our faculty members and leaders develop, to build stronger strategic partnerships, and to prepare our graduates for an undiscovered future. Ultimately, we seek high-quality dental education for students and optimum oral health for all people. I ask that you join with me in these pursuits. Thank you.