Address by Chair-elect of the ADEA Board of Directors

Lily T. Garcia, D.D.S., M.S., FACP

This address by the 2013-14 Chair-elect of the Board of Directors of the American Dental Education Association was presented to the ADEA House of Delegates at the 91st ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition in San Antonio, Texas. Dr. Garcia is Professor and Associate Dean for Education, The University of Iowa College of Dentistry & Dental Clinics.

I am so pleased to be here today and to offer my sincere gratitude for this incredible opportunity to serve as the Chair of the Board of Directors of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) for the coming year. I want to express my appreciation to each of you representing the seven ADEA Councils for your work, time, and energies. It is from the work of the councils that many insights and initiatives are generated. The excitement I have for the coming year comes with the knowledge that the resources to address whatever challenges we face are in this room. I look forward to working with you as fellow faculty members.

I like to build on Rick Valachovic’s mantra of “the relentless pursuit of strategic alliances” to think not only about how this organization and all of us benefit from ADEA’s partnerships, but also how this organization serves as an incredible networking resource for each of us. In pursuing strategic alliances with each other, we grow the possibilities in our own roles as educators, as we make the most of what we learn here and take it to make everything we do even better. We come together to learn from one another and reflect on the “how, what, and why” of our academic work since this will affect our students now as well as influence them professionally over the next thirty to forty years.

This organization, through the incredible professional staff who manage every aspect of support, the volunteer leadership that I see before me, and the list of leaders that I now follow, has grown significantly over the years in stature and influence. When I think about the past twenty-plus years I’ve been involved in ADEA—from the days the organization was named the American Association of Dental Schools (AADS) to ADEA as we know it now—there are more issues than ever before facing us as dental educators and compelling us to think creatively in preparing our young colleagues for challenges yet unknown. Both in our home institutions and in our work together through ADEA, we need to keep our perspective focused on a clear sense of purpose as we face the issues ahead.

We have yet to fully understand the impact on our profession of the national landscape that has created a new normal for the economy. The financial realities and implementation of the Affordable Care Act help make up the world our new graduates will live in, and hopefully thrive in. Does what we do in our realm of education help position our institutions to manage the best of what they offer to enhance patient care, which, in turn, advances the professional and ethical training our students seek? Since we envision a future enriched by interprofessional education, we must articulate how our students’ education best positions them to become integral partners with those from other health care professions, building on their core strength in oral health.

As the use of technology continues to expand, we are challenged to teach the use of digitally designed dentistry and use it to improve the teaching environment, as well as taking full advantage of the technology as tools to improve the quality of teaching and patient care. The effect of the electronic health record is still primarily within the boundaries of individual institutions and represents only the beginning stages of providing a way to mine data regarding treatment outcomes.

Balancing the budget challenges experienced in academic institutions to avoid placing undue financial burdens on our students should also be carefully managed. The cost of doing the business of education has grown, which is justifiable for many reasons because we need the best educators committed to academic
dentistry in order to provide a high-quality experience for our students. Our collaboration with corporate entities has become essential to introduce technologies and balance budgets, and ADEA has helped academic dental institutions learn how to manage these relationships for a beneficial educational experience.

Many of you are actively implementing the ideas and educational concepts that have resulted from the work of the ADEA Commission on Change and Innovation in Dental Education (ADEA CCI). However, those individuals need to have the appropriate platform in their institutions to both amplify creative principles and implement best practices within their current curricula.

We need to take full advantage of the expertise that the dental specialties and disciplines have to offer in strengthening the educational foundation for our graduates. Ongoing research in these and other fields has led to an unprecedented growth in publications. It takes great capacity to manage and understand the relevant evidence on any topic and translate it into the best educational tenets for our students. Curricula need to use this growth of knowledge to reflect best practices based on the evidence, yet they must remain flexible and well grounded to make use of the tools available in our institutional frameworks.

The fundamental need for diversity in our entering classes is more important than ever before as the U.S. population has changed. When I reflect on my entering class of 1980, there were no African Americans, only a couple of Hispanics, and only a small percentage of women. This has changed. The basic premise of having people with many different life experiences learn together can only enrich the educational experience and create a better learning environment.

The challenges occurring nationally are evidence that states are seeking means to improve access to care, at times at odds with dental practice acts. The practice landscape is changing at a pace most could not have predicted, yet we need to provide the basis by which we ensure our graduates are ready to both practice based on the evidence, yet they must remain flexible and well grounded to make use of the tools available in our institutional frameworks.

Throughout my career, I have had incredible opportunities that I like to call “potholes of opportunity”: encounters that are hard to miss and you have to make an active effort to avoid. Initially, my primary goal after earning my dental degree was to open a private practice, but I had mentors in dental school who inspired me to seek residency training. It was the mentor network that helped me join a great private practice. It was that network of mentors that propelled me into teaching. When I met with Dr. Dominick DePaola during my residency, he encouraged an academic future. Dr. Larry Meskin encouraged me to seek leadership positions, and Dr. Robert Averbach guided me to get more involved in ADEA. I have been truly fortunate to have worked with some incredible individuals here and abroad, even while trying my best to balance my career with a meaningful personal life with my family.

Ultimately, the basic moment of one-on-one teaching is the most rewarding part of being an educator, and there is no role I cherish more than that of being a teacher. You have heard the saying that those who can . . . do, while those who can’t . . . teach. The better version I believe is that those who can do more . . . teach! With that said, I stand before you as the 1976 Future Teachers of America recipient of a $100 scholarship at my high school graduation. I used it along with other scholarships and many more resources when I left home for Austin to attend the University of Texas.

I mention this little known fact about myself to emphasize the path that represents a core value in my family: education. Having an education has been how we, as the Flores and Garcia families, were able to achieve goals and aspire to wonderful professions that helped advance my brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, and nieces, as well as our own children.

If you will grant me this moment, I want to share a special story in Spanish that I will translate shortly:

En mi familia, mis abuelas fueron la clase de mujeres con corazón, alma, y una gran fortaleza. Mi abuela materna tenía cincuenta años cuando atendió la universidad. Ella estudió para ser una maestra de niños. Mi abuela paterna, atendió un programa especial con el nombre de “Escuela Normal” y en doce semanas, también se graduó como maestra para los niños, pero solo para enseñar a niños mejicanos, y solamente podía enseñar en un sitio separado solo para los mejicanos.
Este es el tipo de mujeres que lograron metas más altas de lo que ellas pudieron soñar. Ellas vivieron en un tiempo de gran segregación y de falta de apoyo para las mujeres, pero eso no las detuvo. Este legado se ha convertido en nuestra inspiración y en el valor familiar más preciado.

What I just said in Spanish is intended to demonstrate my respect for and pride in my heritage and my family. Now I’ll translate with a few more details for you.

In my family, my grandmothers were women with heart, soul, and a strong inner fortitude. My grandmother on my mother’s side attended Centenary College in Shreveport, LA, and received a standing ovation at graduation since she had entered college in her fifties to earn a degree in early childhood teaching. My grandmother on my father’s side attended a special school in Austin, TX, called a Normal School to become a teacher, also of younger children. The purpose of a normal school was to teach standards or norms, as in required expectations. This option allowed a high school graduate to earn a teaching certificate in a matter of twelve weeks, but in this situation, she was allowed to teach only the Mexican children, who were located in a separate building referred to as the Mexican unit. This was in 1914. My grandmothers achieved more than anything they could have dreamed early in their lives. They lived in a time of clear segregation and a time that lacked support for women, yet that did not stop them. This legacy in education is part of my family’s inspiration and one of our core values that is most precious to me.

So when asked by those who don’t really know me, “Are you talking about your family again?,” I proudly say yes, and you will hear my pride in honoring a grandmother, long since passed, who could proclaim that every one of her seventeen grandchildren earned a university degree and some pursued graduate education. I was raised to make the most of what your gifts are, and this influence helped me focus on trying to make a difference in each of my patient’s lives as a prosthodontist. Ultimately, my professional dedication has motivated me to be a positive, strong educational influence on the next generations of dentists.

To each of you, I say that ADEA is working through all means possible to help us understand events that are occurring now so that we are fully prepared to educate future practitioners, strengthen our institutions, and pursue fulfilling careers. This is going to be a great year ahead, and I look forward to amplifying the ADEA message.