

Educator's Podium

The Idea of Teaching as a Way to “Give Back”

Jason S. Ng, OD, PhD, FAAO



Jason S. Ng, OD, PhD, FAAO

As an interviewer of prospective students and prospective faculty members, I hear many mentions of “giving back” with regard to an optometric teaching career. Prospective students often cite giving back as the reason they want to eventually teach after a clinical practice career. Prospective faculty, particularly individuals transitioning from private practice or industry, often speak of how successful they’ve been and that they’re now ready to give back. It seems as if applicants expect such statements to result in a positive evaluation, but it isn’t clear to me why this should be the case.

The Way I See It

I suppose I can assume applicants who want to give back by teaching are acknowledging that teachers invest themselves in their students rather than in only themselves. They “pay it forward” and give back the time, knowledge and experience they “took from” their teachers who were giving back to them in the first place. However, in my opinion, teaching is an art, a science and a form of service. While optometric educators are constantly giving back ? to our institutions, to our colleagues, and of course to the students whose lives we touch ? teaching is more than that. For me, entering the teaching profession was more about making a difference than giving back. The passion and energy of my best teachers opened my mind to teaching as a profession. Like many, I’ve had great teachers and I’ve had terrible teachers. Having had both types, especially in my undergraduate studies, I experienced firsthand the difference a terrific teacher can make and this inspired me even more to want to make a difference as a teacher. I wanted to be one of the great ones because I didn’t want students to suffer through the opposite experience.

To me, working towards being the best teacher I can be is not easy. Rather, it’s an intimidating, difficult, life-devoting and never-ending process. Perhaps that’s why “I would like to give back now by starting a teaching career” sounds to me like an assumption that a great clinician and/or practice manager is automatically a great teacher. “See one, do one, teach one” comes to mind. Professionals who have done great things outside of teaching can probably “teach one.” But can they do so at an exceptional level? I don’t think the ability to give back in that way comes that easily to most, no matter how exceptional their abilities in clinical practice or elsewhere.

What I’d Rather Hear

Prospective faculty members who have never taught may be innocently ignorant of the rigors of teaching. Therefore, I don’t think they should rest their passion for embarking on a teaching career solely on a statement about giving back. I want them to say more about why they want to teach. I want them to say more about why teaching excites and inspires them. I want them to say more about how they want to be an exceptional teacher and not just a teacher. I want them to focus on how to best help students, both high and low performers. I want them to ask about teaching resources. I want them to ask about faculty development. I want to see a fire in them and come away with the impression they’ll be an active colleague in helping to shape the teaching persona of the college/university. I want them to focus on the

students, the faculty, the institution and not necessarily only on their own feeling of giving back.

Maybe this is too much to expect from applicants who haven't experienced the highs and lows of teaching or had time to develop a true passion for it. Maybe the thought of giving back is a sufficient place to start, but an open mind is crucial as well. I believe the most successful mindset is that teaching is a unique and challenging profession; success in one aspect of the field doesn't guarantee success as a teacher; and it takes a lot of work to develop into a great teacher. Furthermore, we never really "make it" in teaching because it's constantly evolving, all while we continue to fulfill our commitments of giving back to our students, peers, mentors, institutions and ourselves.

Dr. Ng [jng@ketchum.edu] is an Associate Professor at the Marshall B. Ketchum University Southern California College of Optometry.

Industry News