

Directions in Optometric Education

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Dear Colleagues, Age has a way of making a person re-evaluate the past and contemplate the future. For the past 30 years or so, both of us have been involved indirectly and directly with optometric education. We continue to think about the future of our educational system. Questions that keep coming up include what kind of faculty members are best-suited to meet the needs of an ever-changing profession, and from where should the schools and colleges get these faculty members. Other questions that beg discussion include whose responsibility it is to train faculty for the future, and what makes a good composite faculty.

We would like to initiate a national discussion on these crucial topics, beginning with what is currently being taught in our schools and colleges. We have previously suggested expanding the definition of vision science to include areas such as molecular biology, microbiology, pharmacology, immunology and any other “ology” relevant to our profession.¹ If we agree this should be done, we must ask wheth-

er residency training is adequate for teaching these subjects or whether we need faculty with advanced degrees. Is just having an interest enough, or is having a master’s degree or a PhD necessary? Along with this, we need to consider the bigger picture: 1) whether educators with an MS degree or a PhD who are working at optometric institutions need to be ODs, and 2) how many PhDs do optometric institutions need, if any. We should also ask what is in the best interest of the profession. For example, what does a faculty without PhDs say about a profession? Does hiring PhDs add to the prestige of the program and profession? These issues need to be thoroughly and carefully vetted.

Two basic educational models exist. In one, research is emphasized. In the other, clinical teaching is emphasized. For an academic institution that emphasizes research, it seems sufficient to hire non-OD PhDs. However, should these faculty have knowledge of the profession of optometry, and how should they obtain it? It appears that for optometric schools and colleges that are not part of a state-assisted research university, the trend has become to hire newly minted residency-trained ODs as faculty. These faculty members are utilized in various clinics and labs and occasionally lecture courses as the need arises. Currently, most clinical faculty are residency-trained. Additionally, at most schools and colleges, classroom faculty are residency-trained. Is residency training sufficient for producing a well-educat-

ed clinical professorate? Typically, residents don’t receive training in the ways of academia. By this we mean, ideally, a place where research, clinical or theoretical, is enthusiastically pursued and disseminated; where teaching is important and developed; and where service (administrative or committee level, local or university-wide) is part of the mix. Hopefully, at an optometric institution, respect for service on behalf of the profession, whether it be on the community, Academy or Association level, is also supported. How do traditional academic values become inculcated in the new faculty at institutions that emphasize clinical teaching?

Furthermore, whose responsibility is it to train our faculty-to-be? Should residency programs incorporate training in educational pedagogy and cultivate intellectual curiosity? For the core courses, hiring clinician scientists would be one answer for both models of optometry education, but this requires a big commitment by the institution. It also raises the additional question of whose responsibility it would be to train the clinician scientists. It appears that the model for at least the “ologies” is that it is not optometry’s responsibility, but rather the responsibility of medicine/psychology/integrated biology. No matter who educates clinician scientists, we wonder whether our schools and colleges of optometry can afford to risk hiring new investigators without funding, give them adequate facilities

and time, provide an environment in which they will grow and, perhaps most importantly, provide potential research collaborators for them. Can our profession afford for them not to? Where are appropriate mentors going to come from? We are not altogether sure that a PhD is not considered a liability at some institutions.

We don't presume to have prescriptive solutions, but we would like to facilitate a conversation regarding these important matters. As Program Chair and Chair of the American Academy of Optometry's Optometric Education Section, we would like to continue this discussion at future Academy meetings as well as through journals such as this. We would love to hear your thoughts.

Reference

1. Giese MJ, Seger KR. A vision science reality check. *Optometry*. 2010;81:55-56.

Send Us Your Comments

Do you have any thoughts or insights related to the issues in optometric education presented here? Send your comments to Dr. Aurora Denial at deniala@neco.edu, and we will print them in the next edition of the journal.