

Dental Faculty Shortage in the United States and Canada: Are There Solutions?

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© J Can Dent Assoc 2006; 72(8):725–6
This article has been peer reviewed.

Over the past several decades, many orthodontic teaching positions have remained unfilled and, despite many efforts, the situation doesn't seem to change. Currently, there is a need for approximately 300 dental faculty.¹ Many of these positions have been open for years and the shortage has reached crisis proportions. To solve this problem, the implicit and explicit requirements regarding hiring and retention of those in dental teaching positions must change. If no one fills these positions, dental programs will not be able to train future dentists properly and public health will suffer.

The problem is not only to fill the current open positions, but also to address future needs.² Most dental faculty are in their 50s and 60s and succession plans seldom exist.^{3–5} According to estimates, approximately 210 new full-time dental faculty will be needed each year just to maintain current numbers in the United States (6,400 full-time equivalent positions).^{6–8} In addition to retiring, faculty are also abandoning educational careers to pursue private practice^{2,8,9} or are planning to do so in the future.¹⁰ The reasons are primarily work-related and not necessarily exclusively economic.^{2,9–11}

Currently, part-time faculty are responsible for a large proportion of the duties that were previously carried out by full-time staff.^{6,8,10} This may be a provisional solution, although

disadvantages may include lack of staff involvement in the teaching process.

Why are Canadian and American dentists not filling these positions? Among the most important reasons are low salaries compared with private practice earnings; the inability to practise outside the university to supplement income; and the requirements (PhD and expertise in attracting grants) for successful tenure.^{4,12–14}

Several solutions have been proposed.⁵ For most dental graduates, the decision to enter academia is difficult because of the need to repay the large loans they needed to support their education.⁶ If more training stipends^{6,15} were available, student loans would be considerably lower. Salary support is also very important in retaining faculty.¹⁰ Other proposed solutions include allowing greater flexibility in moving through academic ranks and making special adjustments for dentistry^{7,8,16,17}; with help from the professional organizations, making academia more attractive to potential immigrants^{4,15,18}; following the medical model,⁴ whereby faculty can supplement their salary through practices in the school clinics; using federal stipends to subsidize dental training on the condition that the student enters academia for a number of years^{2,15}; temporarily changing the rules to allow foreign-qualified academics to fill the gaps⁴; soliciting funds from dental graduates to support faculty salaries at their alma mater; and supplementing

salaries through better intramural or extramural practice conditions.¹⁰

Why are immigrants not filling faculty positions? Recognition of previous academic and professional training is a key obstacle. Only a few professional organizations have made efforts to facilitate the recognition of foreign professional credentials.¹⁹ Even in the European community, where dental licences are valid in all member countries, restrictions apply. In the future, common guidelines and procedures for educating dentists may be possible, allowing dentists to practise anywhere in the world after meeting some reasonable conditions for licence²⁰; however, current differences in dental training among countries make this approach untenable. Hiring foreign dental faculty has advantages — new expertise and experience and an effective way to fill open positions temporarily.¹⁵ However, in the long term, attractive conditions must be offered, in addition to simplifying the recognition of dental qualifications.

Another important consideration is the need for experienced faculty to mentor young colleagues as they develop the skills necessary to succeed in the academic arena.^{2,3} Unfortunately, the middle-aged faculty who are best qualified to provide such guidance are the most scarce.³ As a result, the initial experience of many young faculty may be frustrating, leading them to rapid abandonment of academia.^{2,3} Succession planning with careful selection, mentorship and retention of young faculty is key to stability as the older generation retires.²¹

As noted above, significant change in current conditions and requirements must take place to address the current shortage of dental faculty. We must either make dental academic careers more attractive to Canadian dentists or simplify the recognition process and bridging or upgrading programs for foreign-qualified dental faculty. The deadline for finding a solution to the problem is getting closer. ♦

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.

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