Report offers solutions to address decline in US dental faculty

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A new report by an Indiana University School of Dentistry department chair with researchers from six other U.S. dental schools is calling for quick and creative solutions to address the growing scarcity of full-time faculty members within the nation's dental school programs.

The report cites widening pay gaps between private practice dentists and clinical professors at dental schools as one factor in fewer dentists committing to careers in teaching. Clinical faculty also report being overwhelmed and burned out by the workload demands of teaching, clinical, research and administrative responsibilities.

Published in the January edition of the *Journal of Dental Education*, the paper calls for the development of mandatory mentoring programs, among other recommendations, to help reverse the trend.

"We feel it is essential that mentoring programs be considered mandatory within dental schools if this trend toward a major crisis in dentistry is to be reversed as rapidly as possible," said Dr. Vanchit John, chairman of the IU School of Dentistry's Department of Periodontics and Allied Dental Programs and the lead author of the report. "Clinical faculty shortages could be characterized as the most critical challenge confronting dentistry."

Citing an average of almost seven faculty vacancies per dental school and an average pay gap between general practice dentists and clinical faculty of $86,000 a year, the report, titled "Recruitment, Development

and Retention of Dental Faculty in a Changing Environment," offers a comprehensive outline for restoring teaching numbers.

Among other proposals are improved faculty compensation, new loan and tuition repayment and waiver programs, junior faculty development scholarships and allowing more flexibility for clinical faculty to have time for private practices.

"We're calling it the 'Growing Our Own' plan," John said. "And the concept of growing our own faculty and developing mentoring programs should serve as cornerstones to help resolve shortages."

If dental school administrators were to develop in-school programs that identify students and specialty residents interested in the idea of teaching as a career then knowledge about those opportunities would increase, the report notes. Recent data show only 25 percent of current dental faculty aware that a mentoring program was available at their school, and 35 percent said they had never received any mentoring themselves. Within dental faculty that did receive mentoring, one in four said they were dissatisfied with the experience.

The report recommends dental schools commit to a series of seven specific steps toward developing successful mentoring programs:

- Provide adequate faculty time for mentoring.
- Choose and assign appropriate mentor-mentee teams.
- Require regular meetings and follow-ups among the teams and the administration.
- Involve department chairs in the process.

- Develop long-range goals for the mentee.
- Provide feedback and advice regularly to the teams from senior faculty and administration.
- Consider development of cross-disciplinary mentoring teams on university campuses.

While mentoring should serve as the cornerstone for reversing the trend of faculty shortages, those programs alone won't address all the problems pointed out in the report, John said. Individual institutional and national programs should also be developed with goals of improving faculty compensation, allowing increases in practice time for clinicians, and allowing clinicians more freedom for consulting and lecturing opportunities.

Provided by Indiana University

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