

The integrity of the institution

Our universities are in a crisis—and they don't know it. Listen to a politician talking about the United States. "What's gone wrong is a welfare system which subsidized people for doing nothing, a criminal system which tolerated drug dealers, an educational system which allows kids to not learn and which rewards tenured teachers who can't teach . . ." Substitute "university" for "welfare system" and "criminal," and change "drug dealers" to "frauds," and the words could describe some of our dental schools.

What's gone wrong with our universities, you say? Surely they don't subsidize people for doing nothing? Does the tenure system really protect professors who can't teach? Can the educational system allow students to graduate as dentists without learning modern techniques? Do universities tolerate academic fraud? Regrettably, I believe the answer is "yes" to all these questions.

Yes, our dental schools subsidize faculty members who do nothing but tread water. Obviously this is not the case of all dental school teachers, many of whom are highly productive and at the top of their profession. However, it is the productive who must overwork to take up the slack of the nonproductive. And it is the productive who are repeatedly demoralized by receiving the same pay raises as their nonproductive colleagues—the pay system protects the lazy and discriminates against the over-achiever. In industry, low productivity is not tolerated. All over the United States today businesses are trimming back their workforces to increase efficiency. But at our dental schools the mortal grip of tenure holds the efficiency of the institution to ransom. Tenure protects the inefficient and the mediocre at the expense of the young, enthusiastic, and highly motivated (and thereby productive) teachers. All this, under the guise of protecting academic freedom.

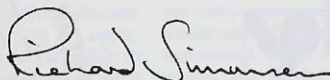
Yes, our dental schools have been guilty of stuffing students full of traditional methods with far too little attention being paid to exposing students to new technology and materials. It's easier that way—the same teaching materials can be used year after year. Fortunately, I do see improvement ahead. The top universities and dental industry will facilitate information and technology transfer using the Internet and

other novel educational methods. So even if a particular university faculty is not up-to-date, a student with initiative will at least have much easier access to the latest information.

Yes, our universities tolerate academic fraud and dishonesty. Apparently, avoiding confrontation is less costly in terms of unwanted publicity. A recent case involved a faculty member of a major southern US dental school who failed repeatedly to produce the supporting documentation for the alleged results of a contracted study. The individual was asked to produce data sheets and microscopic slide sections upon which he had purportedly based the "final report" of his study. He could not. The final report appeared to include data on many nonexistent samples. Both the researcher and the university failed to fulfill their contractual obligations to the study grantor by refusing, to this day, almost 3 years after the inconsistencies were discovered, to submit the study materials. If the materials exist, as claimed, why can they not be produced? Thus have the highest levels of a university administration kowtowed to a fraud. The university has essentially endorsed the trail of obfuscation that this role model for students used to cheat his way out of his obligations. Keeping silent about a wrong, as university administrators have done in this case, makes them a part of the wrong. The researcher, by the way, has since been promoted! Is this example typical of our universities or an aberration?

Of course, not all dental schools teach out-of-date techniques and tolerate fraud. The tragedy is that those that do may not recognize the crisis they are in. They just can't see it because they live in a world where out-of-date techniques, low productivity, and apparently even fraud are accepted.

Major reform is overdue. The integrity of the institution is at stake.



Richard J. Simonsen
 Editor-in-Chief