



## The dental education bubble and faculty future



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How are we to ensure the continuation of high-quality dental care? This aim is at least partially attained by retaining the best educational faculty and attracting the best students.<sup>1</sup> The latter is threatened by the increasing cost of dental education in the USA. In 1982, students graduated from dental school with an average debt of \$26,000. By 1998, the equivalent figure had risen to \$84,089.<sup>2</sup> The debt of new dental graduates has now grown to an average of \$200,000!<sup>3</sup>

This will have a great influence on the professional choices made after graduation.<sup>3</sup> Is a university career attractive to a graduate encumbered by such debt? The growing number of faculty vacancies, particularly in the clinical departments, suggests this is not the case.<sup>4</sup> Several factors may explain this problem: lack of encouragement by faculty, inadequate role models, and large debt upon graduation. The situation would largely seem to reflect the attractiveness of a significantly higher income in private practice enabling a perceived better lifestyle and a more efficient return of their debt. Indeed, the most common reason for full-time faculty leaving universities, other than retirement, is to enter private practice. The many full-time faculty vacancies may make high-level dental education hard or even impossible to achieve. In the long term we may be looking at devastating consequences to dental education and research.<sup>1</sup>

What has this to do with a dental education bubble? Patients are paying increasingly more for dental services, so students should be willing to pay more for their dental education, inevitably incurring debt. A simple measure of this balance is the ratio between the average dental student debt and the average entry-level annual income of dental professionals. These ratios reflect how students

actually manage buying their education. In 1996 this ratio was around 70% while in 2010 it was over 90%.<sup>5</sup> The moment that ratio reflects an unsustainable debt through future earnings we are in a dangerous bubble.

So are we in a dental education bubble? The high costs of dental education are sustainable only if dentists make a substantial amount of money, but dentists' earnings have been slow-moving over the past decade.<sup>6</sup> This may make an academic career more attractive in future but in the meanwhile, the lack of candidates for academia suggests that in this arena, the bubble may be rupturing. If this continues a burst bubble can only be averted if schools see it coming before their students do and, with innovative strategies, acquire the ability to lower their prices.

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