

# Innovation and Entrepreneurship

## *A Forum for Introducing New Products Into the Dental School Curriculum*

**W**here is the next generation of customers for dental manufacturers and distributors? It's in today's dental schools. For this reason, the first priority of those in the dental industry should be to establish a participatory role in the selection of dental school curriculum contents. Surprisingly, this is not the case.

In my more than 30 years of experience as a dental school faculty member, I am not aware of industry representatives being involved in planning the clinical curriculum. Inquiries to those in industry with whom I have worked invariably produce the same response: they have never been asked to participate.

This lack of participation is surprising for several reasons. First, manufacturers and distributors have access to the latest, and in some cases, the next generation of services, technologies, equipment, and products. Because these products will no doubt be marketed to the new dental graduate, it would seem reasonable to expose students to them while in school where faculty can supervise the learning process for their use.

A second reason to invite dental industry representatives to participate in curriculum planning is for them to learn what types of products are needed to assist faculty in teaching the required clinical skills. For example, the number of women admitted to dental schools has been steadily increasing; the 2004 class at the University of Connecticut School of Dental Medicine was approximately 50% women. Do women dentists face unique prob-

lems when using equipment and products designed for men? Clearly, the best people to answer this question would be the dental clinical faculty. Each day they see the difficulties women experience and, in many cases, they have made suggestions for changes. If there was an annual event or forum where clinical dental educators and dental industry representatives could discuss these issues and brainstorm for solutions, imagine how much more rapidly our profession could make progress toward its goal of improving the oral health care of the public.

Finally, the dental research scientist could benefit from participating in this dialogue as well. Many laboratory discoveries are trapped in the new product pipeline in need of exposure and capital. Such discoveries include vaccines for caries and periodontal disease, bioscaffolds for rebuilding lost bone, and the use of stem cells for the development of laboratory grown teeth.

For these discoveries to emerge from the product pipeline, dental companies must learn about them from the research faculty. Equally as important, they must hear from the clinical dental faculty that if these products are made available they will be accepted into the clinical curriculum.

Because a dialogue between dental research scientists, clinical faculty, and industry representatives would surely accelerate the transition of the dental profession from the mechanical/microbial era to the biotechnology/host modification era, it would be worthwhile for both dental academic organizations and for dental industry associations to host a venue for such a dialogue.

Currently, I am not aware of any dental school that has a policy, process, or annual event that allows for such a dialogue to take place. There are, however, precedents for such



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events. In 2000, as director of the New Products and Technologies Program, at the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), I assisted the NIDCR leadership in planning and implementing a Technology Forum. Attendees were from the dental industry and dental faculty as well as from the Food and Drug Administration and NIDCR.

The forum explored pathways for converting discoveries to new products; identified barriers, real or imaginary, in these pathways; and recommended policies that would break down these barriers. The results of the 2000 forum were so successful that a second was held in 2001.

The NIDCR's intent when sponsoring such innovative programs is to demonstrate the potential of a specific program as a model for solving problems—in this case, the problems voiced by the stakeholders involved in new product development. The expectation is that once its success is demonstrated, the model would be adopted by other organizations. As a result, the Center for Research and Education in Technology Evaluation (CRETE) at the University of Connecticut School of Dental Medicine is using the NIDCR model to promote a dialogue between the dental industry and dental academics. CRETE is exploring the possibility with the Dental Trade Alliance to offer a Product Acceptance Forum (PAF) for the 56 dental schools and the more than 300 dental manufacturers and distributors. One format suggested for the PAF would include presentations by dental companies on improvements in existing products and equipment such as composites and hand-pieces, as well as presentations on the next generation of products by representatives from start-ups and incubator companies.

Other formats are also being considered with the same goal in mind: to create a venue that would allow academic and industry participants to discuss new products and to develop a process to introduce them into the dental curriculum. It is hoped that the PAF would be an annual event and would provide the first step toward including the dental industry in the planning of the *clinical* dental curriculum.

*For those in academia (including part-time private practice) and the dental industry interested in participating in the Product Acceptance Forum, please contact me at [erossona@nso2.uhc.edu](mailto:erossona@nso2.uhc.edu).*

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