

*In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, recounts his experiences at the 2010 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition and shares his assessment of the work represented there.*



## **Collectively and As Individuals, ADEA Members Move Mountains**

I left the 2010 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition more impressed than ever by what our members are accomplishing on their home campuses and through our Association. Okay, maybe this doesn't come as a surprise, but I truly wish each of you could have been there to experience for yourselves the magnitude and vibrancy of what is occurring in our community.

This year's gathering focused on assessment, and I think everyone in attendance left inspired to try something new or foster ongoing efforts in this area. Three Presidential Symposia explored the vital role that planning and assessment play in promoting institutional change, the role of assessment in helping faculty members document excellence in their teaching and learning activities, and the impact of various types of assessments on student learning outcomes. I urge you to experience some of the educational sessions for yourself through the [ADEA Live Learning Center](#), but just to whet your appetite, let me share a few observations.

Sunday's symposium examined several models of institutional change and explored their utility in the world of higher education. Then presenters moved from the theoretical to the concrete, sharing their experiences implementing change in the spheres of recruitment, e-learning, curriculum management, and community-based education. This presentation of case studies from Baylor College of Dentistry and the University of Detroit Mercy is an excellent resource for those of you undertaking similar projects at your home institutions.

Monday's symposium presented three new approaches to faculty assessment. The Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health employs what it terms 360-degree evaluations, which involve both self-reflection and peer evaluation. The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston has created two tenure tracks, a clinical educator pathway and a scientist educator pathway, in order to increase recognition for teaching. The University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Dentistry is using e-portfolios to bring out the unique contributions of faculty and reveal individuals' growth. I came away from this presentation with a sense that the relatively uniform approach to promotion and tenure that has long characterized academia may soon give way to a system in which each institution examines its own culture and resources in search of those approaches that best meet its needs.

Finally on Tuesday, faculty and students brought scholarly research, a revealing video, and their personal experiences to the table to call into question the value, purpose, validity, and fairness of multiple-choice exams. What do they propose as alternative means of student evaluation? Self-assessment, "blue book" examinations, and direct faculty assessments of student preclinical performance were deemed preferable but pose challenges of their own. Panelists agreed on the need to use assessments that do not rely on guessing and on the importance of providing feedback to students so they can learn from their mistakes. They also discussed at length the challenge of calibrating faculty to achieve an acceptable degree of consistency in how students are assessed.

Despite the unquestionable success of this exploration of assessment, I think I will remember this year's gathering for its affirmation of my belief that while each of us can make a difference on our own, together we can move mountains. Even before the meeting's official kick-off, I saw evidence of this. A workshop and recruitment fair

*The 2010 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition affirmed my belief in both the power of collective action and the impact that a single individual can have.*

for predoctoral students and advisors drew nearly 400 participants on Saturday, many more than organizers hoped for. A stirring presentation by Dr. Leo E. Rouse, Dean of the Howard University College of Dentistry and ADEA's new President-elect, was followed by speeches from current students who shared inspirational tales of overcoming barriers to pursue their educational and professional dreams. I have no doubt that many of those present will submit applications to dental school in the very near future.

That evening, several hundred ADEA members and their guests celebrated the accomplishments of this year's recipients of the William J. Gies Awards for Vision, Innovation, and Achievement. If anyone needs evidence that individuals and institutions can move metaphorical mountains, look no farther than this year's stellar award winners (see the [March 2010 issue of Charting Progress](#)).

The next morning, we kicked off the proceedings with another series of awards. I found myself in the awkward position of receiving this year's ADEA Distinguished Service Award. As I told those present for the occasion, when I first received word I worried that maybe my time was over, but when no gold watch was forthcoming, I accepted the award with pleasure. It has been a distinct honor for me to serve as steward of our Association, but I must share the credit for what we have accomplished. Our community is fortunate to have extraordinary leaders, and I believe we have the most talented staff of any association, as the ADEA Presidential Citations given to two members of our senior staff, Dr. Eugene L. Anderson and Dr. Anne Wells, affirm.

In my acceptance speech, I talked about my belief in the impact of the many and the impact of the one, about the power of collective action and the impact that a single individual can have. As it happens, our first plenary speaker addressed much the same issue.

Seattle-based photographer [Chris Jordan](#) shared slides of his breathtaking work and invited us to look at the big picture in both the literal and figurative senses of that phrase. Using computer technology to combine photographs in ingenious ways, Chris creates large-scale images conveying the overwhelmingly large numbers that represent the impact of human beings on planet Earth. His work raises questions, not just about mass consumption but also about the role of individuals in shaping the world. We have Virginia Commonwealth University's Martha Bushong, Chair of this year's ADEA Annual Session Program Committee, to thank for finding this thought-provoking speaker, not to mention her terrific work in chairing the ADEA Annual Session Program Committee!

The ADEA Center for Public Policy and Advocacy organized Monday's Political Spotlight plenary, featuring national political correspondent for National Public Radio [Mara Liasson](#). She began with a lesson in etymology, reminding the audience that the word politics comes from "polis," meaning many, and "ticks," meaning bloodsucking insects. She went on to discuss the health reform bill that was then languishing in Congress. I'm wondering if President Obama overheard her advice that he needed to "get in touch with his inner LBJ."

She went on to dissect the various events that led to the stalemate on health reform and predicted that the outlook for Democrats in the 2010 midterm elections is grim. NPR polling data makes clear that Republican victories in New Jersey, Virginia, and Massachusetts are not individual, local phenomena but represent a trend. As she put it, "one cannot overestimate the Scott Brown effect." As outgoing ADEA President Ron Hunt noted in closing the session, this lengthy analysis of the current state of politics was a real treat for those of us accustomed to hearing Mara for only two or three minutes at a clip on the radio.

Tuesday's plenary on social media featured Canadian Web consultant [Amber MacArthur](#), who didn't hesitate to brag a bit about her country's gold medal finish in Olympic men's ice hockey two nights earlier. This social media guru and journalist urged educators in the audience to look more seriously at the possibilities of using new media in the classroom. As she put it, "Technology is not a choice." It is part of our reality. As her first slide illustrated, even as traditional an institution as [the Vatican](#) is using Facebook, YouTube, and iPhone applications. In fact, Amber told us the use of social media rose 82% between 2007 and 2009.

I can't go into all the details of her presentation, which ranged from describing [a service that tracks users' purchases and posts them online in real time](#) to [a new video game produced by the Federation of American Scientists](#) that harnesses the allure of first-person-shooter games in its quest to educate young people about the fight against bacteria. Let's just say she made a persuasive case that new media have a place in education—not just as bells and whistles, but as drivers in engaging students and fostering collaboration.

The ADEA Evening Plenary on Gender Issues, better known as Discourse and Dessert, featured Dr. J.C. Hayward this year. The first woman to anchor a newscast in the D.C. market, this veteran broadcaster regaled the crowd with stories about how she turned professional stumbling blocks into stepping stones. "You just have to

be made of steel," she insisted. "If there is something you want, you have to go after it and not be deterred." No doubt her words rang true to many of her generational peers in the audience. I hope younger attendees and those new to dental education were inspired by J.C.'s persistence in achieving her professional goals.

The ADEA Commission on Change and Innovation in Dental Education (ADEA CCI), which inspired ADEA President Ron Hunt to select assessment as the theme for the 2010 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition, also hosted three well-attended sessions on related topics. On Monday, a wide-ranging discussion of institutional assessment explored strategic planning, accreditation, benchmarking, capacity building, and quality improvement, raising some provocative questions. If an institution does something really well that is not essential to its mission, should the institution be doing it? Could institutional culture be preventing some schools from moving forward? The panelists did not provide the answers to these questions, but left all of us much to ponder and a great framework within which to explore these and other challenging topics.

Later in the day, ADEA CCI hosted a lively presentation by the Chancellor of the University System of Maryland, Dr. William E. Kirwan, a dynamic leader credited with turning the university (once seen by many as a "degree factory") into a contender for admission to the upper echelons of higher education. In his view, transformational change requires the creation of a roadmap, leadership to create an environment for change, and processes to drive and sustain a change agenda. He emphasized that values are the bedrock from which change flows, citing memorable examples from corporate history as well as his own experiences as a university administrator. He also outlined the steps his administration has taken to control costs, raise enrollment and graduation rates, and substantially reduce tuition in the state relative to peer institutions.

On Tuesday, ADEA CCI brought together a panel discussion on the new oral health practitioners currently being educated in Minnesota. Starting with an overview of federal legislation related to new dental workforce models and state workforce trends, the panel examined Minnesota's creation of a new oral health practitioner called a dental therapist and efforts by the state's public institutions of higher learning to devise programs to prepare individuals for the role.

The panelists discussed controversies surrounding the legislation, differences in the degree programs currently being offered, and concerns about how dental therapists might achieve the state's goal of improving access to care. Attendees also raised questions about how patients will receive the new practitioners and whether they will reduce the cost of dental care. This vital dialogue will continue as the situation evolves, with dental educators endeavoring to bring clarity to the discussion around the competencies and preparation of new oral care professionals.

A separate session on the challenges related to children's oral health engaged a roomful of mostly pediatric dentists in a passionate discussion of how new provider types might improve children's oral health. A recent report commissioned by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which revisited the 2000 *Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health*, served as a starting point for provocative discussion of academic dentistry's preparation of graduates willing and capable of caring for America's children, especially the very young.

According to panelists, well-entrenched practices in dental schools discourage students from embracing the higher calling of helping vulnerable patients achieve health. Nevertheless, the presenters offered a wide range of avenues that institutions, ADEA members, and the Association as a whole can take to improve children's access to care. These include changes to accreditation standards, interprofessional initiatives, and the development of new workforce and business models—in short, ways in which, collectively and as individuals, we can have an impact on children's oral health.

Of course, with hundreds of events, several hundred poster presentations, dozens of exhibitors sharing the latest advances in technology and materials science, and nearly 1,800 participants adding their voices to the mix, I could go on and on. I'd love to share Dr. Lawrence Tabak's presentation on stimulus funds for oral and craniofacial research, or discuss the session co-sponsored by several ADEA sections on strategic directions for our schools in an age of health reform. I want to let you in on the dental jokes that all outsiders to our community feel compelled to offer (I found Mara Liasson's "I always talk politics with my dentist, but he does most of the talking" better than most), but the time has come to wrap this up.

If you have made it this far and still have any doubt that attending the 2011 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition would be worth your while, let me share the advice that Jason Tanguay, 2009-10 Chair of the ADEA Council of Students, offered his fellow students: "If you can represent ADEA at your school and make it to these meetings, you'll get a lot out of it."

You can hear Jason's impressions of the 2010 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition for yourself and get a flavor of the event at [www.adea.org/2010annualsession/online](http://www.adea.org/2010annualsession/online),

viewing his comments and several other YouTube videos. In keeping with Amber MacArthur's proposition, ADEA is making use of this and other social media. Throughout the conference, photos were downloaded to Flickr, and ADEA members not in attendance were invited to stay informed online.

I hope to see you next year in San Diego, where we will explore interprofessionalism. You can take in the events and witness the many ways that ADEA members move mountains. Better yet, go to [www.adea.org/2011annualsession](http://www.adea.org/2011annualsession) today and learn more about how to organize a session, talk about your work, or present a poster—you'll see what it feels like to move a mountain yourself.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rich', with a long, sweeping underline.

***Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H.***  
***Executive Director***  
**[valachovic@adea.org](mailto:valachovic@adea.org)**

**American Dental Education Association**

**1400 K Street, NW, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20005**