Guest Editorial: 
Bridging the Great Divide - What's all This Talk about an Ivory Tower?

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It has been just about a year and a half since I made the transition from life as a private practitioner to that of a full-time educator, and it is a time to reflect on some of the changes but mostly on a change in perspective. In our lives today we see dichotomies. These dichotomies are often used to demark supposedly insurmountable differences between opposing groups involved in playing zero-sum games. Finger pointing and blame get shared along these axes. One such axis is the one between those who teach and those who render clinical care.

From the clinicians’ side I have often heard accusations slung at “those ivory tower academicians,” as if those who teach have little understanding of what it takes to care for patients in the real world or what the small business owner needs to do to run their practice. Covertly hidden in the accusation, and at times hidden to both the accuser and the accused, are thoughts that what is being taught is out of touch with what is wanted and needed by those in the trenches. Additionally, there are suppositions that academicians lead cushy lives with much time off, and that they use that free time to ruminate over details and considerations on the search for zebras, which so rarely present themselves in actual clinical care. Lastly, from the clinicians’ side, we see anxiety over the perception of scope of practice that schools seem to be leading the profession into areas that some clinicians would prefer to be left alone.

At meetings which bring together clinicians and academicians in ways that allow for extended and in-depth interactions, I have had the chance to hear the heart-felt request on the part of academicians for better communication between these groups. I have also heard the need for clinicians to codify observations and treatment protocols so that academicians can investigate the science and the evidence-base to modify what is being taught so that it truly reflects cutting-edge clinical practice. One meeting where this happens regularly is the Conference on Clinical Vision Care (CCVC), cosponsored by OEP and Southern College of Optometry (SCO). Its 18th annual meeting will be on 13-15 July 2012. This unique meeting has about one-third of its attendees from the SCO faculty along with some student and resident participation with the bulk of attendees being practicing clinicians. At this meeting I have experienced the most open and fruitful exchanges between clinicians and faculty that have led to changes in both what is taught and what is practiced.

Now that I have joined academia full-time I experience that from a different perspective. There is no dichotomy, there is no “us vs. them” mentality, and in fact, we are all working for the same thing—better care for the public.

A number of observations from my new life in academia might help others to bridge this ‘great divide.’ The first is that the more I learn about my fellow faculty, the more I see in each of them that they have their priorities straight and in alignment with my own and with what I perceive clinicians want. We all want the next generation of optometrists to be the best problem-solving, behavior-observing, trained-to-use-technology-to-its-full, caring, and empathetic clinicians ever. They are willing to look at new innovations, to look back at old tried and true clinical insights, to read, study and inquire into new areas of thought, and to question their own held beliefs that underlie their way of thinking and practicing. I have seen this sharing and openness to a higher degree than I ever imagined and am comforted by it.

I have seen and felt the strong support by administration to move along all of these lines; in particular to foster the advancement of our evidence-base and the science that is the foundation for the clinical care we provide. This support is evident in the amount of resources devoted to getting faculty and our students and residents out of the institution to interact with front-line clinicians in many different settings, and to get this same group to an incredible panoply of meetings and seminars around the globe.

I also see the dynamic tensions between those who wish that the rate of change would slow down, those who want to push the envelope of our scope of practice, those driving for new legislation, and the schools and colleges of optometry that have to put together a curriculum that does all of this in a finite period of time, while also making sure that students pass the board exams required for them to enter the profession. In reality, it seems to me that the schools are the glue bridging the gap between the extremes, and that they are not in fact responsible for pushing the boundaries of the profession.

Next are the students themselves, our future colleagues. They are eager to learn but have come through a system of education that has the Generation Y or Millenials primed to expect information to be packed in sound bites, that information to be quantized in easy-to-memorize discrete packages, and for things to be presented and tested in the exact same format. The faculty, over their four-year period with these students, work relentlessly against this societal priming to instill the observation skills, the critical thinking and the ability to deal with, what has been termed, ‘fuzzy logic,’ when data sets are less than complete and that data exists on various continua rather than along discrete true/false or yes/no, zero or one logic points. Having the chance to work with students at each step in the process, I am seeing their evolution from typical Millenials to clinicians capable of dealing with nuance and subtlety.

I see a bright future for the profession as the wants and needs of all parties align nicely with clinicians, academicians, students, and administrators all from their separate vantage points coming together to provide the best vision care they can. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to serve in the role of an educator. Although SCO has an 11-story academic building where I teach, I’ve yet to see ivory anywhere within its confines.