
Editorial: “Separate and Distinct” or “Separate and Unequal?”

Chiropractic education in the United States has historically been completely unconnected from state-sponsored educational systems. In the formative years of the profession, this was a natural situation. A new paradigm of professional comportment had been created, accompanied by a new set of intellectual tenets. It is doubtful that our profession could have developed along its current track, or even survived the early years, had it not been free of the sorts of fundamental compromise that would have been required in developing a new field of health care within the already established educational hierarchy. It was important in the early years of chiropractic that its education be “separate and distinct.”

The situation today is decidedly different. Chiropractic is a well-established presence in the health care environment. The culture of chiropractic within the profession is also a rich tapestry with deep historical roots. Our educational methods and principles are, for the most part, consistent with those found in other disciplines. In the current context, we should consider whether it is still necessary to maintain this strict isolation from state-sponsored educational systems. I believe that not only is such isolation no longer necessary, it is in fact a serious impediment to the future development of the chiropractic profession. We are not so much “separate and distinct” as we are “separate and unequal.” Chiropractic educators are, compared to their counterparts in other health professions, overworked, provided with insufficient support and resources, and inadequately trained for scholarly work.

The majority of chiropractic educators and chiropractic students today are engaged in the educational process at institutions that are private and primarily tuition dependent. State-sponsored educational facilities receive public funds, typically derive significant revenue from research projects, and are typically not tuition driven. These disparities in available resources result in disparities in faculty and student performance. Chiropractic faculty typically carry teaching loads that are orders of magnitude greater than those experienced by faculty at state-sponsored institutions, and typically bear administrative responsibility for more than one course. Medical faculty are given adequate lead time, up to a year, to develop a new course; chiropractic faculty may receive as little as a week. Medical faculty are encouraged to continue active practice; chiropractic faculty receive verbal encouragement to do so, but generally experience significant resistance to actual participation. Faculty at state-sponsored institutions are expected to engage in high-quality scholarly work, and have well-developed support and mentorship structures for such activities. Chiropractic faculty generally conduct such activities with little if any institutional support and acquire whatever skills they may possess for such work largely without assistance, formal training, or mentorship. Most chiropractic colleges have a “research department” that generates the majority of scholarly output; sequestration of scholarly activity of this type is virtually unknown in other professions. Compensation packages at chiropractic colleges are significantly

lower than those available through clinical practice (and lower than those typical of state institutions), making it harder to attract the “best and brightest” into our academic community and to retain educators of high quality.

At this juncture in the development of chiropractic education, we are faced with a rather stark choice. We can continue as we have—to operate an under-resourced, tuition-dependent educational system that is destined to fall miserably short of the great potentials inherent in the chiropractic profession. Or, we can take steps to ensure that our programs are adequately resourced, and capable of achieving meaningful progress at a rate other than glacial. If it were possible in the near term to develop significant sources of revenue other than tuition, our community of college administrators would have done so already. The only other opportunity for significant near-term improvement in material support lies in the creation of programs of chiropractic education within the established, state-sponsored system.

There have been numerous attempts at such programs in the United States over the past decade, in the form of “mergers” between private chiropractic colleges and state institutions, or the development of new programs at state institutions. While there are two fledgling programs at private universities, no attempt at creating a program in the public sector has succeeded. Programs of this type have been resisted by elements in the medical community, who rightly see such a development as leading to greater legitimacy of our profession in the eyes of the public.

These proposals have also been resisted by elements within the community of chiropractic educators. While there are doubtless legitimate concerns over any complex proposal, it is equally true that there is almost never a real opportunity without significant risk. However, the fiercest opposition to such programs has in some instances had the appearance of being generated to protect the interests of a particular institution or even a few individuals. Unless and until our institutions and leaders can make the choice of placing the future of the profession ahead of their own narrower interests, our profession will continue to fail to fully achieve its potentials.

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