Exploring the Possibility of a Business Survey Course For Pre-Professional Students

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May 8, 2006
Senior Honors Project

students. I determined that the best ways to decide on the content and structure of the class would be to interview current professionals to get their hindsight opinion and to check for the presence and structure of such a class at other schools.

As I pursued this research, however, it became apparent to me that while such a class would indeed be beneficial, it is perhaps not the most efficient way to educate future doctors, lawyers, and dentists on practice management. A number of discoveries, including the recent addition of practice management courses to graduate school curriculum, and a new realization of the goal of undergraduate study for a professional caused me to change the purpose of my project from developing such a class to discussing the potential for it and its ultimate possibility.

Research

The vast majority of my research is based on interviews with current professionals. Due to their wealth of knowledge obtained from experience and their understanding of the pre-professional situation, they can provide expert advice as to the best content and format for such a class. I interviewed five different individuals:

Dr. Steven Graham

Dr. Graham is a dentist who graduated in 1976. After working with the Health Corps doing prison dentistry for four years he opened his own practice in 1980. Like most dentists at the time he started his practice from scratch, rather than by buying a previous practice, and supplemented his patient base by taking emergency cases sent to him by a dentist across the street when he got to busy. Within a few years he had joined

officially with the other dentist and practiced in a group setting for fourteen years before opening his own practice again. He currently enlists the help of an accountant to handle his taxes and finances and an office manager to handle the day to day responsibilities of billing, records, etc. He supervises the two in their duties and handles all aspects of human resources and payroll himself.

Like most dentists who graduated around the same time as him, Dr. Graham received no business training in school. His primary source of information for running his practice in the early going was advice from other dentists and reps from dental supply companies. They helped him get an idea for how much to charge for services and pay his employees. Ultimately, it was the combination of asking around and quite a bit of trial and error that taught him how to run his practice.

Dr. Gary Gille

Dr. Gille is a dentist who began practicing in 1969. He began working for a dentist for three years before buying a very small practice from a dentist who had been working for two to three years and has continued with the practice ever since. He recently took on another dentist and is beginning the process of retiring and turning over the practice. Like Dr. Graham he employees the help of an accountant and an office manager to help with his finances and the day to day of handling the patients while he handles the management of the office and employees.

Also like Dr. Graham, he received no business training in school and the vast majority of his initial knowledge came from asking around for help. He knew nothing about paying taxes, borrowing money, setting prices, or any of the other key first steps

until he began asking around. At one point he actually went to the library and checked out books on budgeting to help him determine how he would handle his practice's budget. As usual, it seems the single largest educating factor was trial and error.

Dr. Ryan Schumacher

Dr. Schumacher is also a dentist. He graduated from dental school in 2001 and spent three years in the Air Force doing dentistry before joining Dr. Gille's practice two years ago. While in the Air Force he had no management responsibilities and the same remains true in Dr. Gille's office. Since Dr. Gille is the senior dentist and owner of the practice he handles all of the administration. Dr. Schumacher is currently taking all new patients at the practice who don't specifically ask for Dr. Gille and is getting paid a percentage of the work done in the practice.

Keeping with a new trend in dental schools, Dr. Schumacher did take a number of practice management courses during his third and fourth years of dental school. These courses taught the basics of office management, time management, and use of auxiliary (hygienists, assistants, etc) and often brought in outside experts, such as accountants, lawyers, and office managers to supplement the class. One course included a simulation in which the students were allowed to manage a simulated practice and the computer produced simulated results based on how much was spent in different areas (such as marketing vs. equipment) and other factors. The aspects of the classes that he has found most beneficial deal with time management and maximizing the usefulness of his staff. Altogether Dr. Schumacher believes the classes have been a great help in his

understanding of practice management and feels they will continue to be so when he ultimately is in charge of his own practice.

Kippy Gille

Mrs. Gille is the office manager for Dr. Gille's practice (and, if you hadn't already guessed, his wife). She has been working at the practice as the office manager and receptionist for the last ten years. Her responsibilities include managing the patients (scheduling, billing, insurance) and the day to day of the office (ordering supplies, budget reports, etc.). She handled the taxes for the practice until a few years ago, when they began having the accountant handle them.

Mrs. Gille is a college graduate, but is ultimately completely self-taught in the area of dental practice management. She created her own ideas for how the books and records should best be kept and taught herself how to best utilize the scheduling and billing software.

Dr. Walter West

Dr. West practiced optometry for twenty-two years before retiring and becoming a consultant and lecturer full time. He initially worked for another optometrist before starting his own practice from scratch in 1986. He sold this extremely successful practice three years ago and has since been working as a consultant for optometrists who are buying and selling practices, and instructor of communication skills at the Johnson and Johnson eye institute, and a highly regarded lecturer on office management. As one might imagine from his current work, Dr. West enjoys the business aspect of optometry

very much and initially handled every aspect of his practice, from answering the phone to performing the exams. When the practice grew he hired more staff, including an office manager, who handled the day to day running of the practice. He still required her to present with a financial report every day so that he could remain in view of the big picture.

Dr. West did have a bit of business training coming in to practice, but is not sure how much it helped him. He actually took an accounting class in his undergraduate study only to find out quickly that it was not for him. He had a practice management course during his fourth year of optometry school, but feels it was a joke as it was taught by an optometrist who had failed in his practice and who used a book published in the late 1940s. He feels its primary flaw was that it taught you how things had been, not how they were going to be. Ultimately he gathered his own information regarding how to best run his practice by asking around. He used the opinions of his accountant and other optometrists to decide what to pay staff and what to charge for services and then formed his own opinions from there.

Another aspect of my research involved investigating the presence of an undergraduate business course for pre-professionals at other schools. While I found that most schools have a business survey course for Business students similar to the BA201 class at the University of Tennessee, none had a course that was geared specifically at undergraduate students. When I broadened my search I noticed that a number of community colleges, including Miami-Dade Community College and Cuyahoga Community College, offer one to two year certificate courses in dental office management. These certificates tend to include courses on dental office finance, records

management, computer training, and basic understanding of dental terminology and oral anatomy. Some undergraduate universities, such as the University of Southern California's Marshall campus, offer seminars on Leadership and Management for the Dental Professional, but these are geared towards currently practicing dentists and meet one weekend every month for seven months.

I also discovered that it is now commonplace for dental schools to include some practice management curriculum in their third and fourth years. As mentioned above, Dr, Schumacher experienced such courses during his time at the Southern Illinois University School of Dental Medicine and they appear to be light years beyond the experience of Dr. West. The curriculum at the dental school I will be attending, the University of Tennessee College of Dentistry, includes fifteen hours of courses dealing with some aspect of practice management during the third and fourth years. The courses include information on dentist/patient relationships, small business terminology, time management, communication skills, and efficient use of auxiliary staff. There are even courses devoted to initial implementation of a practice and visiting successful practices in the area. While these fifteen hours are miniscule compared to the 202 total hours of class over the four years of school, they do represent a commitment to provide a basic understanding of the business side of running a practice.

Analysis

Analysis of the research reveals a few very interesting points. First of all, those professionals whom I interviewed that had been practicing a long time all expressed that they thought a course that covered business basics was a great idea and provided quite a

bit of insight into its content, however, they all experienced a lack of effective business teaching during their graduate work. On the other hand, Dr. Schumacher, by far the youngest interviewed, thought very highly of the business preparation he had received during dental school and, as a result, did not feel that an undergraduate course was entirely necessary. When combined with the evidence of the University of Tennessee College of Dentistry's new commitment to teaching practice management, it would seem that there has been a trend in the graduate schools towards providing effective preparation for running a dental office.

In addition to evaluating the need for an undergraduate business survey class for pre-professionals, analysis of the research also reveals insight into the content and structure of such a course, were it to exist. Content-wise, I had envisioned the course as providing a basic degree of knowledge in the various areas relevant to running a small business. These included, in my mind, areas like accounting, finance, marketing, and human resources management. The professionals interviewed recommended all of these areas as well, but in different degrees. For example, all used and recommended using an accountant to handle the nuts and bolts of accounting for the practice. This is no surprise, perhaps, since at the end of the day all professionals (and everyone for that matter) would have been accountants if that was what they'd enjoyed. Some expressed that they would like to have a better knowledge of accounting details so that they were not completely reliant on their accountant, and therefore expressed an interest in its inclusion in the course content.

Another common favorite was human resources management, as all felt that your relationship with your staff is the single most important aspect of a successful practice.

They suggested covering topics such as how to conduct an interview, how to evaluate performance fairly, and how and when to conduct staff meetings – all things they had to teach themselves by trial and error. Included in this area would also be discussions of various ways to handle vacation time, sick days, and other benefits as well as the importance of a good receptionist (all three recommended paying this position more than you initially think you should to ensure quality).

Marketing appears to be an interesting area of conversation as well. Advertising among both the dental and optometry fields has long been frowned upon as unethical and classless. Dr. West related a story about handing a fellow optometrist his business card early in his career and being told that "business cards are for businessmen, not optometrists" while it was handed back to him. While advertising has gained more acceptance, few professionals do much more than a listing in the phonebook and the occasional website. This interesting situation would be an important idea to cover, as well as creative ways of marketing that are viewed as acceptable, such as sponsoring a local baseball team to show you're a part of the community. All of the professionals interviewed also stressed the importance of internal marketing and accounted 90% or greater of their new patients to word of mouth or referral. This idea that a good reputation is your most effective marketing tool would be an important area of discussion as well.

Regarding the structure of the course, all agreed that while college instructors and textbooks could provide information regarding general practices of small business management, the most efficient course of action would be to go straight to the source and bring in office managers from various practices as guest lecturers. This would allow the

people who really know the subject matter well to pass on their experience and would provide a number of different viewpoints regarding how specifics are handled. Ultimately, as well, the course would need to be discussion based and stay away from too much heavy business information, as the pre-professional students don't have quite the same interest level in intricate business details, except when it relates directly to their chosen field.

Conclusions

My initial intent with this project was to develop the outline for an undergraduate course that would cover business basics for pre-professional students who one day sought to own and operate their own practice in their respective field. Obviously, though I have discussed briefly the potential content and structure for such a class, I have not attributed much detail to that area of the project. Ultimately, my most interesting discovery during the research for my project is that there is perhaps a reason why such a class does not exist at an undergraduate level, and therefore the focus of my work shifted slightly to determining the possibility of such a class.

While at first glance the presence of such a class seems like a great idea, one has to first consider whether or not it is completely necessary. My initial reaction, and that of the older professionals I interviewed, was absolutely positive, however, Dr. Schumacher's response was negative. These opposing opinions have everything to do with the difference in the amount of training they received in school. Dr. Graham, Dr. Gille, and Dr. West all received little or no training in their respective schools and, like me, were under the impression that that was still the same case today. After Dr.

Schumacher's comments about the business courses he received in dental school I began to check around and discovered that though it is a recent development, the inclusion of practice management curriculum in dental schools is now the norm. Judging from the courses he took and the courses offered by the University of Tennessee School of Dentistry, it is apparent that the training received in dental school is both more extensive and specific than any training an undergraduate course such as the one proposed could offer. This realization of the presence of practice management training as a part of dental school curriculum is perhaps the greatest detraction from the feasibility of an undergraduate survey course because it removes the necessity for such a course, it is not the only one.

The second major issue with such a course deals with the reality that the majority of pre-professional students will not even be accepted into the school they are applying for. Ultimately this is the primary reason that most universities do not offer an undergraduate degree in Pre-Medicine or Pre-Dentistry; it is too much of a gamble. This fact begs the question of whether the course would be a waste of curriculum and resources since it might be for nothing in the end. Certainly this point can be argued by saying that it's only one class and it might be worth the risk, but only if there is no other opportunity for the students to gain the knowledge, and unfortunately we now know that not to be true. Could the class be beneficial? Yes. Is it an effective use of student time and university funds? Likely not.

A third point deals with the logistic difficulty of covering so broad a range of pre-professional fields. While there are certainly many similarities in the knowledge necessary to run an effective medical, dental, or optical practice or a law firm, the

strength of the course and its very reason for existence relies in its ability to provide more detailed education than pre-existing business survey courses like BA201. It would not be reasonable to assume that separate courses could exist for the specific professions at an undergraduate level (especially when they already do at the specific schools), and the inclusion of all areas of curriculum into one course is near impossible.

Ultimately it would seem that the best course of action to increase the business knowledge of pre-professional students would be for the pre-professional advising offices at the universities to encourage students to pursue a business minor, or at the very least take the existing business survey course that the business students take. While the pre-professional students will receive more training while in their graduate studies, this would be able to supplement their knowledge and see things from a general business view. This course of action would also remain beneficial to the student in the event that they are not accepted into school, because it gives them a basic knowledge of business that will benefit them in whatever path they ultimately choose. The idea for an undergraduate course that provides a survey of basic business knowledge specifically to pre-professional students is one that appears great at first glance, but ultimately does not hold up with faced with the reality that it is on many levels neither necessary nor feasible.