

ACADEMIA AND ACCOUNTABILITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE MODELING

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has, throughout its history, taken the greatest pride in the number and variety of its academic programs. With the passing of each new decade, the Kingdom witnesses the development of new scientific disciplines and the establishment of more colleges and universities. Most of these universities and colleges are vibrant and rich in ideas, contributing not only to our students' education but also to the region's growth and prosperity. In their diligent quest to achieve the set objectives, Saudi medical colleges are sparing no effort to gain national and international recognition for excellence in discharging their tripartite mission of medical education, healthcare, and research. To translate these values from theory into practice, Saudi universities utilize the most important assets of all, their faculty. Faculty members are typically known to be disciplined, creative, concerned, thoughtful, and objective, in a tireless pursuit of goodness and truth. However, various influencing factors such as economic, social, cultural and personal may interfere with these pre-requisite faculty characteristics. This article discusses some of these confounding factors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Conflict of interest refers to circumstances in which an individual cannot fulfill the demands of one role without compromising the demands of another, or at least appearing to do so.¹ These conflicts of interest may lead the faculty to undermine research, teaching or even clinical care offered by the university/institute in favor of private gain. Such conflicts of interests have occurred, probably as a result of a mixture of activities conducted by the same persons in the same place thereby giving rise to real or apparent, or potential conflicts among them. Such factors should be carefully managed to minimize the possibility of damage to the individual, the institution and the public. Minimizing conflicts of interest including financial, scientific, cultural or political is the key to success as role models.

CONFLICT OF COMMITMENT

In traditional universities, a professor's job is well understood. It consisted of education and other scholarly activities as time and inclination permitted. There were calls of duty off campus and few competing claims on the faculty's time. However, in today's universities, many issues outside the campus make demands on faculty time and attention; sometimes with the offer of a variety of competing rewards. Such factors can create a conflict which may put a severe strain on the commitment to the institution for which they work and has claim to their first loyalty. A healthy environment should be created within the university to obviate such obstacles. Faculty members, on the other hand, should be clear in their minds as to what they can compromise on and what they cannot.²

THE FACULTY AND THE PROFESSION

The professional colleges exemplify the relationship of faculty to the profession. Medical education and healthcare are closely connected to the profession for which they train students. The walls between faculty and the profession are permeable and the training of students always involves intern apprentice training in the hospitals in which they will later be employed. Faculty research is often directed at contemporary problems in health and may have significant impact on the practice of the profession. This provides medical faculty with a direct, profound and long-lasting influence on the profession in which they work. Universities will forfeit the rights for such an immense role without the presence of dedicated and disciplined faculty who are role models.

ACADEMIA AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Academia is defined as the ability to express one's own opinion on the disciplines without fear of persecution. This ultimate form of freedom allows for the establishment of the embedded concept of a "role

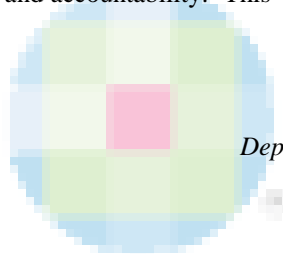
Table 1: Functions of role modeling in higher education

ROLE	FUNCTION
Teacher	Enhancing an individual's skills and intellectual development
Host and Guide	Welcoming the individual into a new occupational and social world and acquainting the individual with its values, customs, resources and role players
Exemplar	Providing role modeling behavior
Sponsor	Using influence to facilitate objectively individual's entry and advancement

model" in higher education.³ Table 1 summarizes the functions of role models. Similar to international universities, Saudi universities have granted their faculty such freedom. In the early days of the KSA, the faculty in higher education, in Saudi medical schools were eloquent, adherents and visible exemplars who understood that faculty were the most powerful single force in the university by remaining committed, concerned, critical of their own institution and the profession. With increasing extramural, technical, economic and social forces, there is a need to formulate and implement a system of accountability. A two-way system based on multiple levels that are relevant, valid, reliable, and reproducible for carrying out appraisals, assessments and evaluations keeping in mind the fact that values are given life by respective faculty members and their institutions.⁴ Such translation of values from theory to practice should be done by utilizing the assets of openness, respect, commitment, integrity and intellectual honesty in a milieu of consensus among students, faculty and the profession.⁵

CONCLUSION

The primary function of the university is education, research and community service. This is done by disciplined and dedicated role model faculty with high standard of academic excellence. However, academia should not be simply viewed as having authority, autonomy and independence but rather as being an intricate network of obligations, responsibilities and accountability. This will transform the vision of education to the reality of professionalism.



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