Academic dermatology is a viable and exciting career. That’s one of the key messages the Association of Professors of Dermatology (www.dermatologyprofessors.org) has been trying to convey, according to association president Michael D. Tharp, MD, the Clark W. Finnerud, MD Professor and Chair of the Department of Dermatology at Rush University Medical Center. He says that the association, dedicated to the recruitment, development and retention of academic faculty, remains relevant as the specialty faces increasing demand for well-trained providers to serve a growing and aging population in the US.

Academic Dermatology Now

A recent AAD/A Practice Profile Survey revealed that just eight percent of dermatologists practice in an academic center. A 2008 report put the number of full-time dermatology faculty members at the nation’s 107 dermatology residency programs at 988. While academic dermatologists represent a minority of the specialty, they bear tremendous responsibility. Each year approximately 300 physicians complete their dermatology residency and enter the field. Statistics suggest that dermatology continues to attract highly competitive applicants. One analysis of the 2005 match, revealed that 52.1 percent of US applicants to dermatology programs had one to five research publications, and 27.9 percent had more than five research publications at the time of the match.

Training positions in dermatology essentially have been capped since 1997, Dr. Tharp points out, “which has left a shortage of dermatologists in some areas of the country, and over the next few years the number of dermatologists per capita will continue to fall.”

Already, dermatologists have been confronting the issue of a possible workforce shortage. Data from AAD Practice Profile Surveys show that the average number of patients a dermatologist in practice sees each year increased from 6,287 in 1996 to 6,717 in 2005. In that same time, the average days worked per week fell from 4.4 to 3.9. Average reported wait times for new patients was 33.2, in the 2007 Practice Profile Survey, while the average wait for established patients was 19.5 days.

Trends suggest that maldistributions in both geographic location and practice type contribute to current workforce problems. Mid-western states tend to have significantly fewer dermatologists per capita than do coastal states. Furthermore, shortages in supply have been identified in medical dermatology and in academic training programs.

Meeting Demands

“The APD believes the number of academic dermatologists is too few and has to increase significantly over time...We need more clinician educators and more scientists. We need the brightest dermatologists,” Dr. Tharp says. “It’s not just that we need to have more departments; We need to have very good departments.”

By Leon Kircik, MD

Restoring the Image of Academic Dermatology

On the eve of its 50th anniversary, the APD says it is dedicated to helping preserve and grow the specialty.

APD President Michael D. Tharp, MD, comments on:

The workforce issue: Some in the specialty feel we already have enough dermatologists and training opportunities. But demographics are shifting. In general everyone realizes we practice for a finite amount of time. Plus, more women are entering the field who may not work as many hours during the child-bearing years. Data show that they make up this time later in their careers, but this reality affects access.

The Growth of APD: The Association of Professors of Dermatology previously consisted primarily of program directors, chairs, and chiefs. Now it is an organization for all of academic dermatology. It’s a meeting place where people can share ideas, discuss common challenges, and develop common solutions.

Every dermatologist in an academic center can become a member, come to the annual meeting and share ideas. We are very excited in the fact that we see APD membership growing.

Next Steps for the APD: We are emphasizing the need to link with other professional organizations dedicated to academic dermatology and research, such as the AAD, Society for Investigative Dermatology (SID), and the Dermatology Foundation (DF). We can work together more effectively to pursue our common interests and expand the specialty.
“Universities are more and more faces some unique challenges,” says Dr. Tharp. But academic dermatology changed over the years, he maintains, though it comes with some challenges. “Academia has lost a bit of its luster.” However, the APD is in a position to meet this training need, Dr. Tharp asserts.

Despite a need for more academic dermatologists to train new members of the specialty, Dr. Tharp admits that some believe “academic dermatology has lost a bit of its luster.” However, he says, the APD is in a position to show young trainees that there are a wealth of exciting career opportunities in academic dermatology. Academic dermatology can be a financially viable and personally rewarding career choice, he maintains, though it comes with some challenges. “Academia has changed over the years,” says Dr. Tharp. But academic dermatology faces some unique challenges. “Universities are more and more dependent on revenue generated from clinical care, thus academic dermatologists are pressured to see more and more patients,” he explains. “That means there’s less time for independent research and for teaching. In the past, an Academic was a teacher and a researcher.”

The time spent caring for patients, who are often referred and more difficult to diagnose and treat, impacts research and teaching time. “Unfortunately, in many institutions, dermatology receives less or little financial support compared to other fields, like internal medicine or surgery, that fill hospital beds and operating rooms,” he notes. “While teaching the next generation of physicians is extremely important, the financial resources and support for these efforts is limited in most academic centers.” Research opportunities are even fewer because of a decline in NIH funding. However, the Dermatology Foundation, which is supported by both dermatologists and industry, has provided over $5 million in career development awards, grants and fellowships in the last several years which has helped fill some of the void in NIH funding, Dr. Tharp says.

Changes in research opportunities, has led to an increase in so-called Clinician Educators, individuals who focus on teaching and clinical care but have limited interest and time for research. While these individuals are extremely important for academic departments because of their contributions to education and patient care, they sometimes are overlooked for promotions and for chair positions, and thus leave academic medicine early in their career.

An Evolving Mission
The APD seeks to, “make clear the opportunities and merits of academic dermatology,” Dr. Tharp says. The association recently opened membership to all dermatologists in academia—it formerly included just program chairs and program directors. As a result of this change in membership, now junior and senior members of academic departments have an organization to “call home,” a place where they can share ideas and learn from one another, he says.

“Many people who pursue academic careers become leaders in our field…Many of the original observations and excitement about what dermatology has to offer comes from academic departments.” Plus, given the role that academic dermatologists play in advancing research and therapeutic innovations, he says, they help represent the specialty to other physicians, policy-makers, and players in the healthcare market.

“It is imperative that our understanding and treatment of skin disease continue,” he insists, “because these advancements serve in great part as the basis by which we are judged by our physician peers and the general public, and it helps them understand that we are and important and necessary specialty.”

2. Wu JJ, Davis KF, Ramirez CC. MD/PhDs are more likely than MDs to choose a career in academic dermatology. Dermatology Online Journal. 2008. 14:1.