Admissions to the Advanced Orthodontic Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Robert J. Isaacson

The Advanced Program in Orthodontics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), is one of several new advanced programs in orthodontics that have been initiated with strong financial support from the Orthodontic Education Company (OEC), founded by Gasper Lazzara. Based on their very significant departures in operation from past practices, these new orthodontic programs have been a hot-button issue for many existing advanced orthodontic programs and the orthodontic community.

This spring I met with the chair of the Orthodontic Program at Las Vegas, Dr. Lynn Hurst, and we discussed the UNLV program in some detail. Dr. Hurst is a 1986 graduate of the program at the University of Oklahoma. He is a diplomate of The American Board of Orthodontics and an active member of the Southwestern Society of Orthodontists. Before coming to Las Vegas, he was in private practice in San Antonio and was recruited to serve as the advance program director at the University of Texas, San Antonio.

One of the major concerns of the orthodontic community has been the question of the source and admission of students in these new programs. The question asked is, “Will an outside source of support create a bias or impact on the academic freedom of the faculty to select the students they deem most appropriate?” I asked Dr. Hurst about this, and he explained to me how their program works.

According to Dr. Hurst, the UNLV Advanced Program in Orthodontics accepted a total of 16 students last year. Eight of these students were accepted by the traditional method of application to the university and an internal review process. This pool of students had no exposure to the OEC during the application process, and the program used the universal common application in the Pass program (a common application used by all participating programs) but did not participate in the Match program (a common acceptance program used by participating programs).

A second group consisted of eight students who applied to what Dr. Hurst termed the scholarship program. They were chosen from an applicant pool derived by the OEC. The OEC used their own mechanism to develop this pool and from this pool submitted a list of students to Dr. Hurst. Dr. Hurst’s program used the identical criteria that were used to select the first eight students to review the scholarship student applicants. Last year the faculty did not find all the scholarship students they wanted from this list, so they asked for additional applicants, which the OEC supplied. UNLV selected the second group of eight scholarship students from this revised list, completing the 16-student class.

It is important to note that in some instances the mean scores of some objective measures such as class rank, grade point, and national board scores were higher for the scholarship students selected than for the first group of eight students selected from the traditional pool of applicants. This unique admissions process obviously precludes the use of the Match program.

Dr. Hurst assured me that once the admission process was complete, the program made no effort to distinguish the scholarship students from the nonscholarship students. Thus it would appear that this unique process has made a sincere effort to maintain uncompromised advanced student quality and faculty freedom of choice. Dr. Hurst also stressed that he could speak only for the UNLV program and was not speaking for other OEC-supported programs.

Now new questions have arisen. In a series of articles in the Las Vegas Sun, reporter Christina Littlefield has described subsequent events. In an August 4, 2006, article she stated that, “Lazzara told UNLV in June that he will not be able to make good on the second half of his $3.5 million gift to UNLV, nor will he be able to make the full $480,000 annual payment that UNLV was counting on for at least the next two years.” She further stated that, “In recent weeks Lazzara has backed out of similar commitments for orthodontic schools he helped start at Jacksonville University and University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.”

What does the future hold for this development? This can only be speculated, but things always change. Apparently at UNLV, “The initial eight students have dropped their contracts and are staying in the program on their own.”
It is far too early to tell what direction these developments will lead, but it is a wake-up call for traditional orthodontic advanced programs and for the discipline itself. It obviously is time to review the ground rules for accreditation of orthodontic educational programs and existing admission processes. If programs such as these can be successfully launched under the current rules, they must be judged appropriate, or the conditions that provoked their initiation must be altered to ensure that orthodontics develops in the best interest of the public and the profession and not as a reactive response to new forces.

REFERENCES

