

## Philosophical guidelines for one academician

During the question period following a talk I gave to the UNAB medical school at Bucaramanga, Colombia, I was asked to describe the philosophical principles that had guided my academic career. I did so. After I returned home to Canada, Dr. Luis Alfonso Díaz, Editor of the MedUNAB journal, asked me if I would write them down for publication in the journal. This commentary is a response to that request.

Briefly stated, there are three philosophical principles that have guided my career:<sup>1</sup>

1. Be loyal to people rather than to institutions.
2. Serve the young.
3. You can become what you pretend to be.

**Be loyal to people rather than to institutions.** By loyalty to people I mean carefully selecting colleagues and students who share your concepts of honesty, scientific rigor, and social responsibility and then supporting them through both the good and bad times that occur during any academic career. Your loyalty is tested when these persons speak out against current scientific or clinical dogma, and when their dedication to the public good leads them to take unpopular stands on social issues.

Here are two examples of what I mean: In the first, my loyalty to persons led me to defend (and shoulder some of the criticism directed toward) colleagues whose research was described as "scientifically impeccable but socially unacceptable" because it disproved the efficacy of current "expert" clinical practice. On another occasion, it led me to take on some of the storm of criticism directed toward a junior colleague when I implemented his proposal to keep drug representatives away from our students. In both cases, I was willing to sacrifice, at least temporarily, my "popularity" and reputation in order to remain true to my colleagues.

Furthermore, in both of these examples I had to reject loyalty to institutions. In the first case, I damaged the reputation

of the "hypertension establishment," and in the second, retaliation by the drug industry was judged to have reduced their willingness to sponsor research at our medical school. I could not serve both my people and my institutions.

On the other hand, in order to serve the public, institutions must constantly change to meet society's changing needs and challenges. But, because their resources (space, money, faculty posts, etc) are limited, the only way for them to give resources to new ventures is to take them away from existing ones. Established departments must lose faculty positions, established research groups must lose accommodations and access to bridge-funding, and the further growth of established, effective academic programs must be restricted. Loyalty to their public mission forces institutions to treat loyalty to individual people as a lower priority. Institutions simply cannot be loyal to all their members, all the time.

The failure to recognize this institutional necessity often leads to crushing disappointment among its members, especially toward the end of their careers. For example, after decades of "loyal service" to one's institution, to then be denied a departmental chair, a program directorship, or even the simple preservation of research space because they are being redirected to a new program is an awful blow.

In summary, to maintain loyalty to individual people, one must inevitably sacrifice loyalty to institutions. Likewise, to meet the changing needs of society, institutions must inevitably sacrifice loyalty to individual people. I have chosen the former path, and have never regretted it.

**Serve the young.** Loyalty to persons, though often expressed in the support of colleagues of equal rank, is epitomized in serving the youngest individuals who are just beginning their academic or professional education or training. At its highest level, it comprises the provision, by an already successful and secure academic, of four services to the young. First, providing the resources (space, equipment, supporting personnel, salary and travel supplements,) that

are required for launching a career, all given freely and without obligation. Second, providing opportunities (but not demands) in the form of a systematic examination of everything that crosses one's desk for its potential contribution to the scientific development and academic advancement of the young. Third, providing frequent, unhurried, and safe opportunities for the junior colleague to think their own way through their choices of educational experiences, areas of concentration, the scientific and methodological challenges in their individual projects, the pros and cons of embarking on a particular programme of research with a particular set of collaborators, and their development as social beings. As before this advice is offered as reflections on their choices from a senior colleague, not as orders to be obeyed. Fourth, the protection of the young from needless academic buffeting and from the bad behavior of other academics. This includes organizing the vigorous debate of their ideas, research designs, data, and conclusions in supportive settings, and proving the vigorous defense of their career development against the actions of jealous colleagues. The name often given to these four services: resources (but not obligations), opportunities (but not demands), advice (but not orders), and protection, is mentoring. Not only has mentoring been found to be key to academic success for the one who receives it, but it also increases the reputation and professional satisfaction of the one who provides it.

**You can become what you pretend to be.** At age 32, I became the founding chair of a new and novel department at a new and novel medical school. I had completed my internal medicine training less than a year earlier, had written only one (unsuccessful) research grant, and was lead author on just two refereed publications. But I had two things in abundance: intense fear about my new job and intense selfishness when it came to my academic ambitions.

I was terrified that no one would want to join my department, that I would never be successful in obtaining research grants or space or other departmental resources, and that I would be so busy keeping the department afloat that I would never have time to achieve my academic ambition of becoming a principal investigator, lead author, and famous researcher.

However, I was raised in optimistic post-WWII times in an optimistic family, and had achieved an optimistic recovery from childhood polio. Moreover, I had had enough clinical

experience to realize that it was important to behave in different ways around different sorts of patients if I was to help them: formal and respectful for some (as was my nature), but pretending to be rough and blunt for others.

I decided to try to transfer this insight and behavior to my new and frightening post. I began to pretend to be an ideal departmental chair: fearless, unselfish, and happy to achieve my academic ambitions through the successes of others, not myself.

I put on a convincing performance. My colleagues in our rapidly growing department marveled at my incurable optimism as we applied for research funds, more space, and more staff. Moreover, I appointed my junior colleagues to leadership roles as we dared to launch the first-ever randomized trials of the nurse-practitioner, of aspirin for transient ischemic attacks, and of compliance-improving strategies in hypertension. Although I wrote much of their grants and often guided them in executing these studies, they became the lead authors, not me.

Over the next decade this pretended unselfish behavior started to become natural to me. I began to relegate myself to junior authorship and, indeed, to take my name off of papers when I thought my presence on it might reduce the credit and advancement given to my junior colleagues. Moreover, my motivation for doing this began to arise from my changing values. Nowadays I deserve my reputation for fearlessness and unselfishness. I have become what I earlier only pretended to be.

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## References

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