

# OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE!

**Low student enrollment at podiatric medical colleges threatens to doom the profession. An independent non-profit believes it can solve the problem once and for all.**

BY ANDREA LINNE

**T**he numbers tell the story. According to the American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine (AACPM) website, total applicants to the 11 podiatric medical schools in the United States has been on a steady decline: In 2020, there were 1,006 applicants; in 2021, 910; in 2022, 716; in 2023, 937, and in 2024, 839. As of mid-May, there were 534 applicants to podiatric medical schools for 2025, according to Patrick A. DeHeer, DPM, president-elect of the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA).

The number of matriculated students is also on a downward trend. According to the AACPM website, in 2020, there were 564 matriculated students; in 2021, 603; in 2022, 531; in

2023; 403; and in 2024, 399.

Based on past years, it's unlikely any school will fill its first year class. "It's too early to know the number of students who will be entering schools this year," says Stephanie Wu, DPM, dean of the Dr. William M. Scholl College of Podiatric Medicine at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science. "Generally that information will not be available until late fall. We maintain our admission standards and deny applicants who do not meet those standards."

The problem of low student enrollment in podiatric medical schools is well known. In August 2022, *Podiatry Management* magazine (to access scan the QR code at right)



Dr. Wu

published the story "Sending Out an SOS" that called attention to the crisis, which, at that time, had been on the radar of some podiatrists. Low student enrollment will result in financial problems for the schools, make it harder for podiatry practices to hire associates and for retiring podiatrists to sell their practices, and it will affect the bottom line of companies that depend on the podiatry profession. The article also reported on some plans to recruit high school and college students.

Past efforts to solve the problem have not turned the tide. Now, Dr. DeHeer believes the Foundation for Podiatric Education (FPE) student recruitment campaign "will solve the problem once and for all." The FPE

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Dr. DeHeer



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is an independent non-profit organization that is taking a data-driven approach. “There’s career awareness, which starts in high school, and there’s student recruitment,” says Dr. DeHeer, chair of the FPE. “We need to go straight to the undergrad or graduate students who are in the process of deciding what their career path is going to look like, so we can stabilize the declining number of applicants for the schools. Our house is on fire. We need to put the fire out now.”

### Feet on the Street

In September 2023, under the leadership of Jeffrey Jensen, DPM, dean of the Arizona College of Podiatric Medicine, the AACPM launched the “Feet On the Street” student recruitment initiative. As Dr. Jensen explained last year, “several deans got together and said we can’t rely on the APMA or other people to fill our colleges. We have to take the bull by the horns. You can’t pass the buck. We need to be responsible for bringing in students into our colleges.”

The goal was for each of the 11 podiatric schools to visit 20 colleges

its would incur costs, including gas, airfare and hotel. To track whether each podiatric school was fulfilling its commitment to visit 20 colleges, Dr. Jensen also developed a project management system. “We gave each school about \$30,000 to do the 20 visits,” Dr. Jensen said. “But they don’t get the \$30,000 unless they meet all the criteria that qualifies as a visit.” Setting up these visits is a



Dr. Jensen

three groups gave us a two-year commitment,” Dr. Jensen said last year. “The rest said, let’s go a year... and look at the progress... and then we’ll make a decision on funding a second year.” Although the program was launched in September, the assessment of the program would be based on the calendar year, from January to December. Dr. Jensen said the project management

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challenge. Many undergraduate student advisors aren’t familiar with podiatry. It’s also difficult to plan events around students’ exam and vacation schedules.

“My budget asked for about \$600,000 the first year,” Dr. Jensen

software would also provide metrics to track the success of the program and that he would provide donors with quarterly reports.

“Dr. Jensen has provided reports,” says Gene Pascarella, DPM, executive director of The Podiatry Foundation, “and they have made some headway.” However, this year, The Podiatry Foundation decided to allocate the \$50,000 set aside to fund low-student enrollment initiatives to the FPE.

Dr. Pascarella says both programs are important and going forward it will be a collaborative effort, with the details still being worked out.

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### Foundation for Podiatric Education

Dr. DeHeer acknowledges the importance of boots on the ground and has participated in some Feet on the Street events. But he says the grassroots approach of presentations and some emails before and after the events is not enough exposure to podiatry and just a first step. “We spent about a year and a half doing research to determine what the problem is, why there is such a lack of understanding about the profession and the career in general, and we found it’s really a marketing issue,”

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or universities annually. Dr. Jensen said the deans divided up the map regionally, so they could cover schools across the United States. At each visit, a faculty member would conduct a presentation and workshop, provide pizza and, working with the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons, connect interested students with a local podiatrist who they could shadow.

Dr. Jensen worked with other deans to create a two-year business plan and a budget, because some vis-

said, “and it’s about \$650,000 the second year. The AACPM is putting \$125,000 a year into it, not only in terms of money, but in terms of employees and things to run the program.” According to Dr. Jensen: the Podiatry Insurance Company of America contributed \$100,000; the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons put in \$100,000 per year; the Podiatry Foundation contributed \$50,000 and the Bako Foundation donated \$30,000.

“When I raised the money, only

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Dr. DeHeer says. The marketing Rule of 7 states that potential customers must encounter a brand's message at least seven times before they act. "That's why FPE is taking an omni-channel, data-driven approach," Dr. DeHeer says.

In 2022, the APMA House of Delegates developed an independent, nonprofit organization with representatives from all the key stakeholders in the profession to determine how best to reach potential students. "We didn't know the answers, and I really felt strongly that we needed to bring in professionals to help us," Dr. DeHeer says. "We put out a request for proposal for data analytic and marketing companies, and we interviewed four of each. We selected a company out of Washington, DC, called JPA Health that does both. We really liked their marketing approach. We thought it was a little edgy. Our target is Generation Z, and we thought their marketing approach would resonate with Gen Z.

"The data analytics part was completed at the end of February," Dr. DeHeer says. "The research found that low

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**— DeHeer**

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student enrollment is a marketing problem. JPA Health interviewed about 500 undergraduate students and surveyed about 500 graduate students and about 200 podiatry students and residents. It's a pretty robust data set. We identified three groups with our data: MCAT takers, health science majors, and college athletes. Based on our research, we found that a different message resonates with each group. They also use different social media platforms, have different ways to gather information and have different influencers in their lives. For some people, it's their parents; for others, mentors; and for college athletes, their coaches.

"Now that we know who our target audiences are, we are developing campaigns based on the characteristics within the specific groups," Dr. DeHeer says. For college athletes, for instance, it's important to be part of a team, while MCAT takers are interested in a career.

"We are testing marketing campaigns to see how they resonate with the different groups," Dr. DeHeer says. "The company we're working with uses proprietary artificial intelligence and machine learning to take all the characteristics of the three groups. JPA

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Health is also analyzing which platforms are best to reach the different groups, including social media, podcasts and direct advertising, such as MCAT YouTube channels for test prep. So there's a lot that goes into this omni-channel marketing program based on the data analytics."

### **Money Matters**

"One challenge is funding for FPE," Dr. DeHeer says. "We have enough money to get through the data analytics part, but now we need to raise more funds for

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—DeHeer**

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the marketing part. We really want to have the marketing materials out and testing them this May and June, so we'll get some late deciders for the next incoming class. And we'll get feedback on what's working and not working so we can make modifications. But we really want to have it ready for the summer, so we can fine tune it for early fall for the next cycle. That's our main target.

"It has been hard for some to understand why both "Feet on the Street" and our organization were knocking on doors for money," Dr. DeHeer says. "It was challenging to get money from people who gave to Feet on the Street, but this is such a big problem that it's all hands on deck. I was hopeful we'd get industry backing because there are billion dollar companies built on the foot and ankle industry and if podiatry goes by the wayside that's going to affect their bottom line substantially. But getting money from them has been a lot harder than support from the key stakeholders within the profession, and I'm not sure why. I think part of it is because of the esoteric abstract data analytics part of it. Now we can show them concrete marketing campaigns and show them that the campaigns are based on the research and data analysis."

In March, Dr. DeHeer presented the Foundation for Podiatric Education student recruitment campaign to attendees at the AMPA House of Delegates meeting. "The FPE received significant donations," Dr. DeHeer says. "More importantly, the FPE message is getting to all the key stakeholders in the profession, with ongoing meetings to secure the necessary funding.

"Feet on the Street and FPE are synergistic," Dr. DeHeer says. "The Feet on the Street plan is fully funded; therefore, the AACPM is redirecting funds to support the FPE/JPA plan. Multiple contact points with prospective

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students are critical to successfully engaging them in considering podiatry seriously. This means omni-channel social media, media encounters

Thinking Outside the Box

“Everyone has a different opinion about what it will take to fix the low student enrollment problem,” Dr. DeHeer says. “In the past, people in the profession have tried to do ev-

“I’m looking at it from an analytic standpoint and what the data shows. That’s what we have to follow to fix the problem.”—DeHeer

and personal encounters like Feet on the Street.

“There is also significant interest in a larger profession branding campaign based on the FPE student recruitment campaign,” Dr. DeHeer says, “so that’s something we’re exploring, too. But it will require a lot more buy-in from stakeholders because it’s expensive. But I think it’s time and necessary.”

everything internally and that has limited how we solve this problem. I’m not about what they think or what I think. I’m looking at it from an analytic standpoint and what the data shows. That’s what we have to follow to fix the problem.”

“The numbers we need to get to are not that big,” Dr. DeHeer says. “The key thing is the ratio of applicants per seat. To be in line with allo-

pathic medicine, it’s about 3.2 to 3.5 per spot. Osteopathic medical schools are not consistent in their reporting of applications; therefore, it is difficult to get a clear picture on the ratio of applications per spot in osteopathic medicine. We just need to get up to 2,500 applications, so it’s not like we need 20,000 applicants. We don’t have a huge mountain to climb. “

“We need the pros to solve this problem,” Dr. DeHeer says. “I feel very confident this marketing approach will work. The problem of low student enrollment must be fixed once and for all.” PM



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