

Quinn's Essentials

The Challenge Facing many TCM Schools in the US

Many in the US TCM community are now aware that we have lost some of our oldest, best-established programs in the last few years—OCOM is the latest in a string of closings. Higher education in general has faced many challenges in recent years. In Portland alone three well-established colleges have closed their doors in the last ten years. In this blog I would like to share some thoughts and observations about where we might go from here.

The elephant in the room is cost of course. I borrowed \$40,000 in total and made it through a master's and a doctoral program (1995-98; 2005-07). Today that is not enough money to pay for one year of TCM education at most institutions. Blaming this on the economy and rising costs is too simple an analysis. It is much more complicated than that.

In a past incarnation, I was a high school teacher in a school with a German partner school near Stuttgart. The two schools both had just under 1000 students and a similar number of teachers. I was fascinated to notice on my visits to Germany that their school was so administratively lean that it was embarrassing by comparison. They had two vice-principals; we had three. Their vice principals were in the classroom 50% of the time; ours never taught a class. Even their principal taught one class. That is almost unheard of for a high school principal in the US. They had two secretaries for the entire school; even some of our departments had a full-time secretary. They had no guidance counselors, while we had six. They built the school next to the town library, so there was no school librarian, and no school monies were spent on books. They had no school cafeteria, and, thus, all those food service personnel were unneeded. The school custodian and his wife put up a table in the lobby during the mid-morning break and sold rolls and marmalade and drinks. School ended at 1:00, at which point students went home for lunch. After that they went to sport clubs or private tutors or did their homework. The point of this all is that when there is a will to be bureaucratically lean, a way will be found.

The TCM schools I am familiar with are not administratively lean. Far from it (sadly). Instead of a school counselor, why not simply give students in need of help a list of all the available community resources nearby? Does a small TCM program really need a full-time mental health counselor of its own? That is just one example. If you asked my old American high school administrators if it would be possible to radically downsize, they would say it is impossible. Their German counterparts proved it is possible. I suspect it is possible in TCM schools as well. (Of course, I realize that it is never a perfect comparison between two systems; the legal requirements of a school in the US are different from those in another country.)

“... Nature also speaks to other unrecognized and unknown senses which lie even deeper to known senses.” *Goethe*

Another example: Before all the current accreditation standards were on the books in the US, there was a two-year program in the SW run by a Japanese acupuncturist. It was run like a small traditional mentorship—just two years in length and quite affordable. The graduates of that program were better acupuncturists than our modern-day graduates of four-year programs. Think about that. In a two-year program they were be prepared to help patients with various common complaints. They just needed an education focused on assessment and treatment skills. Bear in mind that this program taught nothing about herbal medicine and herbal theories. It focused on one style of acupuncture and that is all the students learned in this school (along with direct moxibustion). A program like that is no longer possible due to the many accreditation standards that a current program needs to meet. We should think about that and consider making some changes.

Not all students who dream of being an acupuncturist are cut out to be scholars (in fact most are not), and not all are interested in prescribing herbs. Some are simply gifted with knowing hands and would make great acupuncturists—acupuncture is a manual therapy after all. Perhaps they come to their work from a massage background. We need stripped down programs that settle on a basic set of techniques and knowledge so this type of student can be trained without incurring a ton of debt—and they can graduate and practice safely. After a few years of practice, if they want to return to school to study herbal medicine, they could do so in a program that focuses exclusively on herbs. An herbs-only curriculum could be largely prerecorded, which is an enormous cost-saving, though some in-person time would be needed. Such a program could feature the brightest scholars our field has to offer. At the end of a focused program like this, the students could sit for an herbal medicine exam.

In Japan there are good and bad acupuncture schools, just as there are here, and they all require just three years. They cost less than here. Why is that? In our programs we devote 90% of the time to didactic classes (This has been thoroughly studied in one DAOM capstone.). In Japan they recognize that acupuncture and moxa are manual therapies and therefore devote a good deal of time to in-class skill practice. The teacher walks around and gives close feedback. This is what we need here. And not just with treatment skills but also with assessment skills. For instance, until I learned Engaging Vitality (EV), I did not know how to palpate the location of a channel—and once we are on a channel directly, a world of information becomes available to us, i.e., it is an important skill. Before this EV training the channels were just lines on the charts in my books; now they occupy an important part of my patient assessment. This is an eminently learnable skill, and every program should teach it.

What else would be in a stripped-down acupuncture program? Detailed instruction on the entire channel system, 8EV, divergent channels, main channels, and so on. Most students graduate from a four-year program without this knowledge, and we should find that embarrassing. Also, scalp and auricular acupuncture. And I would include either Bodymapping (simpler) or the Balance Method. Students need the ability to get quick

symptom change, but they also need a concept of assessing and treating the whole. Without this attention to the whole, we risk becoming mere technicians.

A word has to be said here about continuing education (CE) and the potential it holds. When I started my formal studies in 1995 there was almost nothing available in the realm of CE. OCOM was forward-looking and recorded all the outside teachers who visited to teach seminars. These were then available in the library for future students. Those recordings were an important part of my education. With all the CE available now from many companies, I think an argument can be made for a stripped-down entry-level program that comes with a stronger-than-current requirement for CE courses for licensure renewal.

To make such stripped-down programs possible, the powers-that-be in our profession would need to make adjustments to the current accreditation standards. That is a big ask. That's not how administrators think. It is easier to add requirements than it is to remove some. But if something is not done, they will soon be out of business as well. OCOM was once one of the most solid programs in the country and now it is going out of business. Before that the school in Austin. Before that the Bay area school. We need to recognize the warning signs!

And what about the future scholars of Chinese Medicine? Where would they get their training? The basic acupuncture program described above would not even be a degree program—just a certificate would be awarded and the ability to sit for a licensing exam. We can still have degree programs though for those who want to go deeper into the heart of Chinese Medicine. I think a combined master's and doctoral program could be developed to meet this need. Our current DAOM programs could be adapted for this purpose.

In this blog I have floated some ideas in the spirit of problem solving. Collectively there is great wisdom in our community and a wealth of relevant experience to call upon. My ideas are simply proposed to promote further brainstorming. But if we sit on our hands and do nothing, further trouble is around the corner.

Kind regards all around,

Bob Quinn

p.s. Blue Poppy's NCCAOM Continuing Education number is #1, i.e., we created this burgeoning field of TCM CE. Check out our many offerings [here](#).