

From Students to Colleagues

It's that time of year again, when students are in panic mode to get their requirements completed; when multiple awards ceremonies honoring our outstanding students and residents are held; when many State Boards have concluded, yet some of our students still await the results that will determine their immediate futures; when deals are negotiated for practice purchases, associate-ships, and the like. Yes, we're rapidly approaching graduation time in academia. What does this mean? To the faculty, it means a few more weeks of incredibly long hours helping students complete their dental school training, followed by a short "breather" before the summer session resumes. For the students, it means that four long years of study and work have come to an end, and that the next phase of their careers will soon begin. For me, it's a time of reflection, when I look at how our students have grown and matured over these past four years. For the last four weeks, I've been conducting Senior Exit Interviews at West Virginia University (WVU), and have been using the opportunity to get the students' perception of their four-year passage from novice to competent graduate dentist. Our students are incredibly talented (as were the students at UNC-Chapel Hill), and frighteningly bright. Hey, they've been at WVU for four years, and I've only been here a mere nine months. Not only do they know what the School of Dentistry's problems are, they also have good thoughts on how we might solve them for the classes to follow. When I decided to conduct the exit interviews, I ran the risk of this being a total gripe session, or a venting—a bloodletting, if you will. To my sheer delight, it's been an incredibly positive event, and well worth the innumerable hours I've spent with every one of our 50 DDS graduates. They have given me an incredible number of things to think about, constructive criticism to raise as issues with our administrative leadership and faculty, and to consider as viable improvements in our school's overall mission. I'm tabulating their responses (and blinding them, for obvious reasons), and will share them with our faculty and senior administration in the near future. The candor, the professional manner in which they have conducted themselves, and their passion for the school has been very refreshing.

As we approach our graduation exercises on May 14, I have to reflect on the issue of timing—at what point do our students cease being students, and become our colleagues? During my 29 years in academics, I've constantly been bothered by those faculty who treat (or at least, appear to treat) the students as underlings, as "children," or as minimally competent students. Aren't these students our peers and colleagues as soon as they cross the stage at graduation and receive that coveted diploma? Am I missing something here? As a dean, I'm constantly thinking about how our students, if provided with a safe, mentoring, nurturing educational environment, will one day be the ones who will "give back" to the school they trained in, whether financially or by volunteering their time in the clinics. If their educational experience is belittling, hostile, or in any way demeaning, they leave school with the "I'll never cross the threshold of the School of Dentistry" attitude, which hurts us all. Some schools have figured this out—WVU appears to be one of those that have done so, at least according to our exit interviews. Other institutions seem to embrace students, and treat them as colleagues from day one—don't get me wrong—we could improve in many areas at our school, but the camaraderie here is very impressive. Other schools also seem to "get it." If you have not seen the YouTube video on Prosthodontics performed by the students and faculty at the University of Iowa College of Dentistry (that'd be Dr. Steve Aquilino and colleagues), search for "Pros Pros Baby" on YouTube, and enjoy the video. Great job promoting Prosthodontics, Steve, and a great job of treating your students as colleagues! I believe that our colleagues in Iowa have set the bar for creativity!

And, just a quick note to our graduating Prosthodontics residents—congratulations on your incredible accomplishments, and the very best of luck in the next phase of your dental career! I hope you will give back to YOUR institution in the future, and I look forward to seeing you when you challenge the American Board of Prosthodontics exam in the near future! Congratulations, colleagues!

David A. Felton, DDS, MS, FACP
Editor-in-Chief

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