

They're Baaaack!

At the time of this writing, we at the West Virginia University School of Dentistry, have just completed our freshman DDS orientation, and classes started back this week after a short summer break. Morgantown, WV in the summer months is a fabulous place to be—cool days and nights, light traffic patterns, access to restaurants without waiting in long lines, and a time to recharge the proverbial batteries. Last weekend was “move in” weekend for the undergraduate campus. I’ve honestly never seen as many U-Haul trucks in one location as I did this week in Morgantown. Now, and for the next few weeks, we’ll spend lots of time waiting in traffic, getting into a restaurant from 5:00 p.m. and afterwards will be a challenge, and the local Target, WalMart, Sam’s Club, and home improvement stores will be overrun with parents, their college-bound prodigy, and half of their extended family, all collaborating to make the college experience for their children remarkable. I haven’t seen the dumpsters behind the dorms and restaurants as overflowing since this time last year.

While riding the local transportation to work yesterday, several faculty and staff from other parts of the University were griping and complaining about these very issues—one even quipped: “If it weren’t for these darned students, this would be a great place to live and work.” Come on, REALLY? “If it weren’t for these darned students,” most of us at WVU wouldn’t be gainfully employed, at least, not in an academic environment. As a land grant university, WVU faculty are expected to teach students, in multiple disciplines, to be successful—it’s in the Strategic Plan of our University, our Health Sciences Center (HSC), and the individual Schools within the HSC. Personally, I LOVE living in a small college town, with great students, a highly skilled and dedicated faculty and staff, great college athletics, and class sizes where you get to know your students well. It’s exciting to see our students wearing the college logo with pride, and talking with each other about their hopes and dreams for the future. They are, after all, back!

At the end of our Freshman Orientation week, we held our Professionalism Assembly, where our entering students collectively repeat the WVU Code of Professionalism, sign the official professionalism document pledging to act as ethical professionals, and celebrate the end of their three days of dental school orientation with their parents and families at a lovely reception. Now, it’s time to get back to work, do all we can to encourage and motivate these highly intelligent fledgling students, and transform them from the novice into the next generation of oral health care providers. As faculty, this is a task we do not take lightly, as it is, after all, our reason for being. To teach students, many who don’t know the difference between a molar and a canine, or the difference between a root canal and implant, what they need know to be entering dentists, in four short years, is truly a monumental task. Think about how much information we convey, how we challenge students with never-ending competency assessments, the huge course load our students take year-round (unlike our colleagues in other health care professions, by the way), and what they learn and perform both preclinically and clinically, and it simply boggles the imagination. For someone who finished dental school 35 years ago, I’m in awe by how much MORE information our students are expected to learn now than we were so many years ago.

“These darned students” are truly gifted, and a joy to be around. Challenging? Certainly! Rewarding? Absolutely! So, the next time you interview a soon-to-be-grad as a possible associate for your practice, don’t judge them on what they don’t yet know about dentistry, judge them of the voluminous material they have already learned. I believe you’ll be very surprised in what they have already learned, and have accomplished. Our students are back, and I, for one, am absolutely elated that they ARE!

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