



A Monthly Newsletter from ADEA Executive Director Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H.

In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, describes the value of assessing noncognitive factors as a part of dental education programs' admissions process.



Getting the Whole Story: A Holistic Admissions Process

It's about selecting those who reveal an understanding of and commitment to the professions.

Talk to any prospective student about why he or she is pursuing a career in the dental profession, and you will hear a unique story. There is the working mother who decides mid career to become a dentist, the student who wants to give back to the small rural town where he grew up, and the first generation college student who knew from age 8 she wanted to be a dentist. The stories reflect robust academic and professional experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories.

When a student's experiences—in addition to numerical indicators—are taken into consideration, the whole person is revealed. Taking individuals' stories into consideration is helpful not only in choosing the best candidates for dental education programs, but also in ensuring the best educational experience for all.

We know that quantitative assessments such as GPAs and DAT scores moderately predict academic performance in didactic courses. But these measures do not tell the complete story about our applicants or assess important qualities we seek, such as professionalism or the potential to deliver care in a culturally competent manner or contribute to the diversity of the student body. Finding ways to measure what William E. Sedlacek, Ph.D., M.S., author of *Beyond The Big Test*, calls "noncognitive variables" is important in evaluating applicants for admission. It helps us select classes with more diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. And diversity leads to a better education for the entire class.

Holistic admissions practices that seek diverse student bodies and assess noncognitive qualities have withstood legal scrutiny, starting with *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978. More recently, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan Law School's holistic review process that considered race as one of many factors in making admissions decisions. The other factors Michigan's law school considered included work, life, leadership, and service experiences.

Many academic dental institutions have conducted holistic review of admissions applications for some time. Venita Sposetti, D.M.D., Assistant Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Florida College of Dentistry, has implemented holistic admissions practices and received consistent praise from instructors about the quality of incoming classes. The admissions committee continually evaluates the process and outcomes to ensure the practice continues to move in a positive direction. Dr. Sposetti explained that it's about selecting those who reveal an understanding of and commitment to the professions. "The quality of your student body changes when you're admitting people who are really engaged," she said.

Diversity in dentistry and all of the health professions is an important topic these days. Just last month ADEA President James Q. Swift, D.D.S., testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions on dental health care workforce issues. On behalf of the Association, Dr. Swift urged the committee to prioritize resources and funding to increase the diversity of the dental workforce, improve access to oral health care, and address the projected shortages of oral health care providers. Attracting students who will work on these issues is one way to help address oral health disparities. It's estimated that about 7% of professionally active dentists are underrepresented minorities (URM), while nearly 28% of the U.S. population are URM. And while we are experiencing modest increases in diversity in our predoctoral applicant pools, we have not seen corresponding increases in enrollment.

The question is: Where do we go from here? Knowing the benefits of holistic admissions practices, how can we enhance our efforts to educate a dental workforce that will reflect the diversity and needs of the population they will be caring for? The key is finding more effective ways to analyze noncognitive factors that define the needed qualities and then implementing them. LaurBn Yuill, an admissions coordinator at the University of Florida College of Dentistry, points out, "I look at what people do with their time."

Anne Wells, Ed.D., ADEA Associate Executive Director for Educational Pathways, says there are a variety of experiences that can indicate work ethic and dedication: community service; work and military experience, especially while attending school; and overcoming challenging life situations or economic hardship. Dr. Wells and Dave Brunson, D.D.S., Associate Director of the ADEA Center for Equity and Diversity, hold admissions committee workshops for ADEA Member Institutions interested in establishing holistic admissions practices that match their missions and values. To find out more about holding a workshop at your institution, please contact Dr. Brunson at <mailto:brunsond@adea.org>

Holistic admissions practices are also a major focus of ADEA AFASA (the ADEA Sections on Dental School Admissions Officers and on Student Affairs and Financial Aid). Members collect online resources in the AFASA Community of Interest and share holistic admissions best practices at meetings. If you'd like to join the AFASA Community of Interest, visit the ADEA service center at info.adea.org, and sign up under Networking > ADEA Communities of Interest.

The value of holistic admissions practices becomes apparent to those who make a commitment to achieving a diverse student body. They lead to outstanding educational experiences within diverse environments and contribute to improving the oral health of the public. That's the whole story, and it's one you'll be hearing a lot about in the months ahead.



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