

# Alumni are key to excellence

**A**re you as surprised as I was to learn that most of our colleagues do not contribute to their dental schools? Reportedly, fewer than 9% of graduates contribute to their alma maters.<sup>1</sup> After I graduated, I had my diploma properly mounted and framed so that I could hang it prominently in my office. Seeing it causes me to reflect on how appreciative I am for the fine education I received. I'm grateful for the opportunity my degree has afforded to positively impact the oral and overall health of patients as well as to provide for my family's needs.

I was curious about why so many dentists fail to support their alma maters, so I called some friends at University of Detroit Mercy. Tom Sklut, Director of Development, told me, "There are many reasons that people give for not contributing to their dental schools." However, he reminded me, "One of the biggest reasons that they should be involved is to ensure the quality of education at their school."

Kimberly Raleigh, Director of Continuing Education and Alumni Relations, said, "Alumni relations can be a powerful symbiotic relationship: Practitioners are able to hone their skills and enhance their practice by participating in continuing education courses. The school benefits from alumni feedback, both formal and anecdotal. The school uses that feedback to increase program efficacy at both the continuing education and dental school levels."

The problem is that many dentists have little understanding of the connection between philanthropy and the educations we received. The fact is, no matter how much tuition we paid—and tuition has risen considerably in recent years—our education was supported in part by the generosity of people who came before us.

We know all the reasons for not being more involved, from a busy family and professional life to a bad experience with a faculty member to any of a plethora

of slights by our school, real or imagined. Nevertheless, our active involvement is key to the continued strength of the system of dental education and practice as well as to the continued power of the diploma hanging on the wall.

Sklut made an additional point: "The value of involved alumni is not limited to financial support."

"Here at Detroit Mercy," Raleigh said, "we have all types of opportunities for our alumni to contribute to the school, including our mentoring program and volunteer opportunities in the community alongside our students. Recently, we began a program using live phone interviews and emailed questionnaires, asking not for money but for feedback, advice, and counsel about educational preparation and professional trends."

Lunch and learn presentations are another opportunity to share important content. Students are sponges, curious and interested in the practical aspects of dentistry. They appreciate having someone on the outside sharing tips for success. And, of course, they always appreciate the gift of a free lunch.

Reflect on what dentistry has provided to us. We are who we are in large part because of the opportunities that our education has provided. I can think of no better profession to support and celebrate. The diplomas hanging on our walls are signs of the quality care we share with our patients and the community. Give something of yourself. Volunteer, be a mentor, invite a student to shadow in your office, offer to be on the alumni board, or send a check. Your involvement is critical. Keep your diploma, your profession, and your school strong.



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## Reference

1. Council for Aid to Education. *2015 Voluntary Support of Education*. New York: Council for Aid to Education; 2016.

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