

Dedicated Faculty Key to Thriving Technology Programs

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The number of ADA-accredited dental technology programs has decreased by two-thirds since 1984, when the number of programs was at an all-time high of 59. Now, with just 20 accredited programs left, LMT visits two thriving schools on opposite coasts--Los Angeles City College and New York City College of Technology--to learn their secrets of success. In large part, that success can be attributed to the programs' hard-working faculties, steadfast in their commitment to education. In fact, the two schools work cooperatively, frequently sharing ideas on how to keep their programs vibrant and best educate the technicians of the future.



The NYCCT staff includes (from l. to r.): Nicholas Manos, Daniel Alter, Joseph Caputo, Philip Russo, Avis Smith, Renata Budny, Anthony Sena, Esther Cuya, Jean Robert Bonhomme and Josephine Glennon.



The department recently upgraded to "smart classrooms" that feature computers, DVD players and visualizers (shown here)--microscopes with cameras that project images onto large screens for easy viewing.

New York City College of Technology

If there's a shortage of technicians entering the workforce, you wouldn't know it by visiting the Department of Restorative Dentistry at the New York City College of Technology (NYCCT). On a typical weekday afternoon, dozens of students are spread out amongst three large classrooms, heads bent over crowns in concentration, looking up firing parameters, discussing dentures and interacting with professors.

As other programs watch enrollments shrink and close their doors, the NYCCT program--founded in 1946 and the oldest in the nation--is growing. In 2007 there were 100 students; today, there are 150 and the staff has grown from nine to 15 in five years. So what sophisticated method is the school using to recruit students? Good, old-fashioned word of mouth. "Most of our students have a family member or friend in the field and that, coupled with the high unemployment rate, means there are a lot of applicants so we don't have to recruit right now," says Professor Nick Manos, MS, CDT, a 30-year veteran of the department.



Dana Cohen, CDT, and Arax Cohen, CDT (front row), and Instructor Jack Edwards, CDT (far right), are flanked by LACC dental technology students. Also pictured are visiting lecturers Rich Pavlak, CDT, MDT (far left), and Peter Pizzi, CDT, MDT (second from right).



Rich Pavlak, CDT, MDT, offers career advice during a presentation he and Peter Pizzi, CDT, MDT, gave to LACC students last May.

Clearly, word of mouth in the nation's largest city has its advantages: With a population of over eight million, hundreds of laboratories in its backyard, a host of educational groups at its fingertips and dental technology programs at two local high schools, a New York City location offers many resources other schools may lack.

But it takes more than a high-profile zip code to make this program tick; at the heart of this thriving department is the dedication and hard work of its faculty. "The answer to the success of this program is in this room," says NYCCT President Russell Hotzler, PhD, gesturing to the staff gathered around a large table in one of the college's conference rooms. "This dedicated group of individuals is very serious about developing and maintaining this program."

In the last few years, the faculty--13 of whom are alumni--has worked to improve the program by implementing many new features. For instance, to ensure graduates are productive technicians, NYCCT created a mandatory externship program for its students. After their first year, students are required to work a minimum of three eight-hour days at an in-house or commercial laboratory. The school now also offers some online courses for greater flexibility. In this virtual classroom, professors post course information online and can even include photos, videos, voice overs and more. Students can access the information any time, day or night. "Think of digital instruction as a prelude to the profession that becomes inevitably digitized more and more every day," says Professor Renata Budny, MBA, MDT, CDT, who spearheaded the project.

All of the faculty's efforts are paying off: the program has a graduation rate of 80%--the highest rate in the entire college.

Staying Connected

Also key to the program's success is the faculty's tireless efforts to stay ingrained in the industry--establishing and maintaining solid relationships with its 2,000 alumni, manufacturers and the industry at large and advocating for support. The school has recently received generous donations from Dentsply, GC, Ivoclar Vivadent, Nobel Biocare, Pentron, Valplast and Vident.

In addition, the program has cooperative relationships with local educational bodies, including the Northeastern Gnathological Society (NGS) and New York University College of Dentistry. For instance, the NGS invites all NYCCT students to attend its two annual NGS meetings at no charge and NYU offers the students free admission to its annual Ceramic Symposium--exposure that offers invaluable learning opportunities for the students.

The department is also getting support from the college in the form of a new home in a portion of a soon-to-be-built, 350,000-sq-ft building just across the street from its current location. The 28-month construction project starts this fall and the department will gain state-of-the-art features and equipment.

"We're lucky to have the support of the administration, alumni and manufacturers," says Manos. "When everybody comes together, everybody wins."

Los Angeles City College

Dental technology schools are not training technicians, they're educating them. We don't just teach 'how to' but also 'why,'" says Dana Cohen, CDT, Department Chair, Dental Technology program at Los Angeles City College (LACC).

Cohen has been teaching the "why" of dental technology at LACC for more than 30 years, injecting his energy and passion for the profession into the curriculum and its students. Arax Cohen, CDT, professor--and also Dana's wife--joined him at LACC in 1995 and the duo has truly made the program their life's work. "We think of our students as family. We have a vision of where we want each one to go and work with them to get there. And that's on all levels--academic, career guidance and even English, math or time-management skills," says Dana Cohen, who is also a graduate of LACC and the NADL's 2011 Educator of the Year.

Located in the heart of Los Angeles, LACC is the oldest of the nine colleges that make up the Los Angeles Community College system and serves 15,000 students. Currently, there are 44 students in the two-year dental technology program; two full-time and two part-time instructors cover the fixed, removable and orthodontic specialties as well as anatomy, materials, history of the industry, ethics and laboratory management. Looking ahead to 2012, enrollment looks promising since the three classes that are prerequisites for the program--model and die skills, introduction to different specialties, and head and neck anatomy--are already filled to capacity beginning this fall.

That said, Cohen says there's an ongoing, concerted effort to attract students into the program. "We always have to worry about getting new students, and need to be creative because we haven't had advertising funds for the last few years," he says. One strategy: offering entry-level courses at times that other departments on campus do not--such as Friday afternoons--therefore attracting enrolled students who need credits, introducing them to a career opportunity they would not otherwise know existed.

Another feature in its favor is LACC's affiliation with two high-profile programs at the UCLA School of Dentistry, a connection that came about thanks to Cohen's relationship with Dr. Ed McLaren and Dr. William Yancey of UCLA. These advanced programs--Master Dental Ceramist with Dr. McLaren and the Advanced Prosthodontics, Implantology and Maxillofacial program with Hiroake Okabe and Jungo Endo--are taught at UCLA but students are enrolled through LACC. "The relationship with UCLA has brought our program into a much larger arena," he says. "That visibility--along with the fact that we are the only department in the college that has a national accreditation (through the ADA)--has been important to the administration. This gives us some leverage in terms of funding and support for the program."

That funding--as well as donations from manufacturers and suppliers (including Vident, Sirona, Pentron, Nobel Biocare and Harris Discount Supply)--is essential to keep pace with changes in the industry. Located in LACC's new, modern Science and Technology building, the dental technology classrooms are outfitted with flat-screen monitors at every workstation, CAD/CAM systems, laser welders, induction casting machines, and even digital photography equipment so the students can assemble portfolios of their work.

In an effort to enhance productivity--and ultimately graduates' value to prospective employers--instructors have started complementing traditional over-the-shoulder teaching with PTC's TVS 2000 system. Students are also encouraged to work part-time in a laboratory; since a model and die course is one of the prerequisites for the program, they have a marketable, entry-level job skill early on.

To further prepare them, Cohen is very frank about the profession of dental technology. "We let our students know this can be a demanding career path and that not all laboratory owners and managers recognize the value of formalized education," he says. "But when I run into graduates and they tell me about their success in the field and how much they enjoy it, it's incredibly gratifying."

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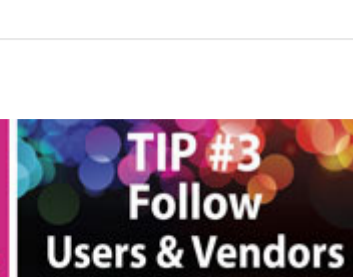
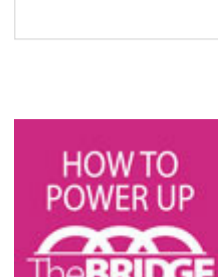
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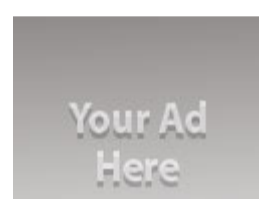
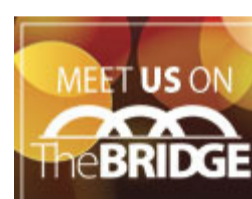
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