

# Bright students, bright smiles

By Vicky Cerino

They are the cream of the crop. Each year, about 45 students are accepted into the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Dentistry – that's after screening 600 applications and interviewing 120 candidates.

Indeed, the freshmen students who enter the college are some of the brightest and most talented among their peers in the 55 other dental schools in the United States. They are high achievers in the classroom, score well on the Dental Achievement Test, are involved in many activities and possess strong interview skills.

In the past seven years, UNMC's first-year dental students have had an average grade point average of above 3.65. This year's incoming class has a GPA of 3.74, which ranks it first in the nation, the seventh time in the past 10 years that that honor has gone to the UNMC College of Dentistry's incoming class.

UNMC dental students also have ranked consistently in the top 10 on the National Dental Board Examinations and regional dental licensure examinations. These exams evaluate students' knowledge and application of dentistry skills, as well as business management, public health issues and safety.

Last year, UNMC's entire senior dental class, on its first try, passed part two of the National Board Dental Examination – an uncommon feat. The class' average score placed it second in the country. The same class also holds the distinction of a 100 percent pass rate for part one of the exam two years earlier.

"When students graduate and go for their residency and then say they're from Nebraska, there's an expectation that they can walk into a first job or residency and start working. They don't have to be re-trained," said David Brown, Ph.D., executive associate dean of the college and a professor of oral biology.

Some of the tools used by the college are a competency-based curriculum and an extensive program for measuring student performance.

Although faculty say a high GPA is one predictor of academic success, it takes a lot more than good grades to do well through dental school. What's harder to measure are the things that really seem to make the difference in both students and faculty – work ethic, diligence and passion for dentistry.

"Once a student joins us, I guess we feel there's a two-way obligation," said Curt Kuster, D.D.S., professor of pediatric dentistry and director of admissions. "The students are expected to put forth their very best effort and complete the program. We have an obligation to provide all that we can to help them earn their education, and that can involve tutorial work and other types of assistance."

Being accepted with good GPAs is one thing, maintaining them in dental school is another, according to Dave Rallis, D.D.S., and Sara Budden Meng, D.D.S., both recent graduates of the dental college. They compared the intensity of the first two

years of dental school to taking 35 college credits at once – twice as much as a typical college load.

Dr. Rallis, of Lincoln, said students who work hard in the classroom tend to also excel clinically.

"A lot of dentistry is practice," Dr. Rallis said. "You can go to the lab and do pre-clinical exercises. There will be people there until midnight. And the people that tend to work hard in the classroom also work hard in the lab. You can really become a good dentist."

Dr. Budden Meng, of Abilene, Kan., applied and received invitations for interviews at five other dental



Brian Chong, D.D.S., assistant professor, UNMC College of Dentistry, and dental students Brad Alderman and Zeena Al-Tamimi examine a dental model.

schools. "I came here because of the atmosphere. When I came back here the second time to ask questions, I was sent on another tour with students who had only positive things to say about their school. I was impressed."

She also checked out UNMC's reputation through a dental licensure examiner from another state.

"I had asked the examiner which schools did a good job of preparing students. UNMC was at the top of his list. He highly recommended UNMC. That was enough for me," Dr. Budden Meng said. "I also like the large town, but not-too-large atmosphere and the smaller class size."

Said Dr. Brown: "We want everyone to succeed and to do well. So we provide tutoring, regular feedback on academic performance and get in touch with students early to resolve problems. We muster all our know-how to keep students in school, in good standing and performing as best as they can."

EDUCATION