Columbia Visiting Professor Program:  
Contemporary Issues in Dentistry

The Columbia University College of Dental Medicine Visiting Professor Program is a leadership development project intended to raise institutional awareness of contemporary issues in Dentistry. It is our belief that all our students, faculty and alumni must learn to manage the important professional challenges they will encounter in both the near and distant future.

Leadership requires knowledge and vision and can be learned and developed by carefully examining the contemporary and sometimes controversial issues of the day. Visiting professors are nominated by an advisory committee, which selects individuals who are recognized leaders in a specific oral health issue chosen for analysis each year. They must be distinguished in their field and role models for our students. A visiting professor is much more than just a guest lecturer; he/she must bring an exciting and overarching perspective of the topic and take a very personal interest in working intimately with our students.

The visiting professor makes a year-long commitment to act as a guide to both our student scholars and Columbia faculty members chosen as in-house mentors to these students. The program was launched in the fall of 1980 and in the past thirty-seven years has featured a veritable who’s who of leaders in dentistry.

Student scholars are selected by a subcommittee which interviews students recommended by the Associate Dean for Student Affairs and Associate Dean for Postdoctoral Programs. Typically, four predoctoral and postdoctoral students are chosen from a group comprising personal and professional excellence and superb performance at Columbia. Those recommended for interviews are provided with literature from the Visiting Professor. Members of the subcommittee invite those students to participate in the program based upon their degree of familiarity with the literature, interest in and enthusiasm for the topic, leadership potential, interest in an academic career and their communication skills. Faculty mentors are chosen by the dean and the advisory committee based upon their familiarity with the topic, interest and desire to be role models and guides and their leadership abilities.

Among the most recent topics chosen for presentation over the last few years have been: “Alternative Oral Health Providers, New Work Force Models”; “Dental Service Organizations and Other Future Practice Models”; “The Era of Big Data and Role of Health Informatics and Information Technology”; “Precise and Personalized Healthcare”; “Economic Factors Affecting the Future of the Practice of Dentistry”; and most recently, “The Evolving Role of Dentists in Healthcare.”
The Visiting Professorship project begins in February with a student feedback session reviewing the previous years’ program. The new topic, Visiting Professor, student scholars and faculty mentors are then selected.

Beginning in May, conference calls and face to face meetings are arranged and conducted between all the participants. Student topics based on the overall conference issue are assigned and faculty mentors are paired with the student scholars. The overall plan for the October/November symposium is then established. Student scholars in conjunction with their mentors work on their individual projects and prepare their presentations for the symposium from June through October while the visiting professor is planning his/her seminar and keynote presentation. Conference calls and meetings are scheduled as necessary. The day before the symposium, a full rehearsal is conducted personally attended by the chairman of the program, the dean, the visiting professor and the mentors. All student presentations are thoroughly reviewed and revised as needed. On that evening all participants are invited to a pre-symposium dinner for final discussions.

On the day of the symposium all faculty and students are encouraged to attend. Local alumni and their guests are invited free of charge, and four to five continuing education credits are offered depending on program length. The event is currently configured as beginning with two interactive seminars. The first is provided by the visiting professor and the second presented by the students. The seminars are followed by an interactive audience participation forum where presentations are reviewed, debated, and discussed. The Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs moderates the program. He formulates audience reaction questions and poses them both before and after the student presentations. Audience answers to the questions are recorded electronically and pre and post results are compared and evaluated to determine the impact of the seminar on changes in audience perceptions. Later in the day, a major keynote presentation is provided by the visiting professor. The program concludes with another panel and audience participation session, once again including an electronic audience reaction survey.

Evidence that the program is providing leadership on the burning questions of the day are noted in comments from three of our former visiting professors. Dr. Richard Valachovic, President and CEO of the American Dental Education Association, and President of the ADEA Gies Foundation, alluded to the findings of our student presentations in our 2012 Symposium on Practice Models of the Future. In remarks published in the July 14, 2014 issue of the ADA News, he mentioned that a version of those presentations were subsequently summarized at the 2014 ADEA Annual Session and described the advantages and disadvantages of working for a DSO. He noted that “Our association (ADEA) and our member schools have remained largely silent on the issue, but it’s time we educated ourselves on this growing sector of our profession, as our colleagues at Columbia CDM are striving to do.” A second comment from the 2014 Visiting Professor, Dr. Martha Somerman, Director of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research at the NIH, came in an email where she stated, “I am recommending your model to other schools!” The most recent comment came from Marko Vujicic, PhD, Chief Economist at the ADA who stated, “I appreciate being selected for this. It was a lot of fun, and the students blew me away. Extremely intelligent and talented. It was great working with you over the months as well, Columbia is a true visionary place for the future of dentistry.”