

Carving Out a Unique Niche for Adult Learning

General dentist learners in the School of Dentistry's MasterTrack Continuing Education (CE) Program agree its continuum of lectures, hands-on lab, homework, and case reports provide an unbeatable educational experience. The 2-year-old program of semi-annual, on-site courses at VCU and between-session homework in the participants' offices offers a learning experience unavailable anywhere else in Virginia and only in a few locations nationwide.

The MasterTrack format uses well-established principles of adult learning theory. Adult learning stresses the importance and value of self-directed and peer-to-peer learning, which complements instruction from content experts. These experiences build a community of learners who improve their knowledge by sharing successes and challenges in and out of the classroom.



"I can't say enough about the VCU MasterTrack Program," commented Dr. Perry Jones (DDS '74). "The program, with its condensed content, allows me time for participation. We meet four straight days, twice each year, with a content focus that includes a hands-on lab for each session. It is really only because of the VCU MasterTrack Program that I can see the light at the end of the tunnel to complete the requirements for my Mastership in the Academy of General Dentistry."

"When the Virginia Academy of General Dentistry (VAGD) approached the school about starting a MasterTrack Program, we faced a pretty tough challenge," said Ms. Martha Clements, Director of Continuing Education and Faculty Development. "Planning 400 hours of comprehensive continuing education programming was only the beginning.

"After that, we had to recruit students and find ways to keep them engaged so they would continue with a CE program for the four years it takes to complete the entire course," Ms. Clements continued. "Initially we hoped to get 20 students. With the VAGD's help, we exceeded our goal, and now we have over 25 who attend semi-annually, and more than 10 who come to sessions of interest."

"High quality instructors and programming are important to maintain interest and enrollment," said Dean Ron Hunt, curriculum facilitator for the MasterTrack Program. "But we also felt we needed to foster a community of clinician learners, so we include receptions and dinners where the participants interact socially. The cohesiveness of the group enhances the learning experience."

The program's participants, however, are its biggest fans. One of them, Dr. French Moore, III (DDS '82), drives five hours each way from Abingdon twice a year to attend. Originally, he wasn't going to enroll, but now he's hooked. At the first session, the school contracted with Dr. Karan Repogle and the Department of Endodontics to teach "rotary endodontics for general dentists."

"I had stopped doing endodontics seven years earlier when my dad had retired and I consolidated his patients with mine," Dr. Moore recalled. "Dr. Repogle and her Endo faculty did a great job of teaching the latest material on the topic, and we spent a half day in the lab using the state-of-the-art equipment and files."

When Dr. Moore returned to work on the Monday following his first MasterTrack session, he saw a new patient who needed a root canal, post, and crown on #10 and crowns on #6 - #11. Instead of delaying the patient's treatment by weeks through referral for the endodontics work, he had the confidence to proceed with treatment that day.

Dean Hunt noted, "French's story is legendary in VCU MasterTrack circles. Now, when our MasterTrackers return home and immediately use a new technique advantageously, it is known as a 'French Moore Experience.'"

Program participants complete on-line quizzes for homework credit, but they say the best experiences come from the homework assignments that give each of them the opportunity to complete treatment on their patients, document the treatment, and present these actual cases in the MasterTrack follow-up case report session. The cases reflect the same concepts and techniques they learn in class.

"So often, we leave CE courses and do not clinically apply the principles we learned," said Dr. Jones.

"MasterTrack is different," explained Dr. Ralph Howell, Jr. (DDS '82). "The homework and case studies keep us engaged in between the sessions. Meanwhile, we earn as many CE credit hours through homework as we do with on-site attendance. The homework hours are free of charge, a real bargain."

The school's Continuing Education Office continually searches for unique programs that few other places offer. With its model of adult learning, a state-of-the-art mannequin lab, and distance learning, the MasterTrack Program seems to be just what our doctors ordered.

VCU MasterTrack

At first, some MasterTrack participants were reluctant to report cases that were less than perfect. They wanted to report only their best work. But now, they understand some of the best learning comes by observing and analyzing situations that didn't work perfectly and seeking guidance from peers and experts.

