Thousands of patients may pass through the clinic doors of dental schools each year. Despite these large numbers, it can be easy to overlook the experience of the patient in the educational setting. From student training to faculty practice to revenue for the program, establishing a strong clinical patient base is essential to educating future dentists.

Recently, a study was released by the Harvard School of Dental Medicine which examined the results of implementing a more patient-centered approach to clinical dental education after five years. The results of this study suggest that “the redesigned patient-centered assessment model of the clinical component of the curriculum helped improve patient care and student learning.”

In the following article, we have detailed four key strategies to improve your patient experience in the educational dental clinic. Throughout each section, we will include several Experience Audit questions to be used as a tool to examine your patient experience. An Experience Audit is an easy way to objectively review your current environments for all aspects of an experience. The exercise can help you uncover disconnects in your mission and/or the reality of your patient’s experience.

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GETTING STARTED

EXPERIENCE DESIGN

It is important to remember that each and every experience is composed of four key elements: the people interacting with you, the services which are being provided, the perception you have before and after an interaction, and of course, the place where it is happening.

If you are considering renovating or updating your facility (the place), it is important to consider each component of the experience and intentionally design it. By taking this Experience Design approach, you can better design the patient’s experience in order to attract and retain this important population.
THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE DOESN’T START AT YOUR FRONT DOOR... IT STARTS BEFORE ARRIVING AT CAMPUS.
Great effort and resources are dedicated to attracting patients to your clinic. Additionally, many potential patients are recruited – or possibly turned away – by word-of-mouth reviews from previous patients. Before even arriving, there are several steps you can take to ensure they enter into their appointment with a positive perception of your clinic.

Most schools rely on pre-registration phone calls to verify appointments. Websites provide useful information to patients regarding what to expect at their appointment, including transportation directions and parking options. Despite the growing access to technology, many of today’s dental schools serve patient populations that may not have access to the internet. An awareness of this, and strategies to address it, can have a big impact on the overall experience of your patients.

We recommend employing large, clear wayfinding signage, not only on the building itself, but located throughout the entire college campus. Consider the frustration for your patient to be lost on your campus and arriving at their appointment late. Signage directing patients to your dental clinic from each campus access point helps to reduce confusion for new patients. And, don’t forget to examine the arrival experience for your patients from parking areas for those who arrive by car.

Paying particular attention to creating a welcoming exterior to your building will set the stage for a positive experience for all patients and visitors to your clinic. If possible, provide a separate entrance for patients. Ensure there is sufficient lighting, landscaping, and even casual outdoor seating for patients to rest or wait for their families. Finally, pay attention to eliminating possible negative influences from the patient entry. Delivery/maintenance entries, trash collection bins, and smoking locations should be removed or shielded whenever possible.

While seemingly simple improvements, these strategies help to enhance the patient arrival experience to your building as well as reinforce the overall brand of your dental school.
Renovations substantially modernized the existing Dental Science Building. The addition provides a new fully-accessible entry for the College, and new clinical space for special care, endodontic and faculty practice. The renovation of the clinic enhances the patient experience by bringing the patient entry closer to parking, increasing the size of operatories, providing greater patient privacy and improving clinical flow and wayfinding.

Patients arriving at campus are met with clear signage to the building and a dedicated visitor parking lot adjacent to the building. The design team paid particular attention to creating a modern, welcoming clinical entry which is located close to patient parking. Visitors enter into an inviting reception area with comfortable seating, warm finishes and ample natural light. Student greeters and escorts are available during normal business hours. A dental pharmacy is conveniently located directly adjacent to the reception area, allowing patients to easily fill prescriptions and purchase other over-the-counter medications.
EXPERIENCE AUDIT QUESTIONS

• Are you verifying access to the internet during pre-registration? If a patient does not have access, are you offering to mail directions to your patients?

• At what point on your campus do you see clear, obvious wayfinding to the clinic?

• Is the patient entry clearly marked? Is it well lit?

• What do you notice as you are walking up to the clinic? Does it look professional? Does it look clean?

• Are there individuals near parking who can give directions?

• Have you trained everyone (including parking attendants, welcome staff, etc) around the campus to support your brand and promote the same “story” about the dental clinics?
2. THE FIRST AND LAST FIVE MINUTES ARE CRUCIAL TO THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE.
Kahler Slater’s work in the hospitality industry has shown us that the first and last few minutes of a guest’s experience, and his or her satisfaction with those minutes, has direct correlation with his or her overall satisfaction with the entire experience. Therefore, many hotels and resorts pay particular attention to making the first and last experiences extremely personal and gracious. For many university dental clinic patients, the same theory holds true. By considering your patients’ check-in, waiting, and check-out experiences, you can help to guarantee that the clinical care received is not overshadowed by an unpleasant first or last few minutes in your clinic.

• **Check-in & Check-out**: Once inside the building, it is natural for anxiety levels for patients to increase. Having a welcoming, smiling person at the front door to greet patients is an easy way to create a calming, personal experience. If possible, locate a welcome desk immediately adjacent to the entry. If this is not possible, try positioning a greeter who can direct or escort patients to registration.

Patient registration kiosks placed immediately inside entrances and visibly accessible are also an option. Be aware, however, of your patient population’s age and technological abilities when considering kiosks. If your patients are elderly or from under-privileged populations, for a time you may still require an individual at the entry to provide assistance. Many colleges are requiring students to greet their patients at the registration or waiting area. This has many advantages beyond just creating a welcoming experience, including increased security and patient privacy as patients are not allowed to walk through the building unattended.

The check-out process is equally important to consider. Instinctively, guests want to exit by following the same path by which they entered the building. Locating check-in and check-out at this entry is an efficient way to ensure patients know where to go, and can possibly reduce the number of full-time employees required. A discrete check-out desk located adjacent to check-in allows you to easily book any necessary follow up appointments and conveniently collect payment.

• **Waiting**: Given the nature of the educational environment, patient appointments may take longer than a typical dental appointment. Additionally, many schools have a patient base which includes the elderly or very young patients, thereby requiring friends or family to accompany them to appointments. Providing a range of waiting options, such as chairs, sofas and tables or workstations, provides patients and their family members a place to wait comfortably. Hospitality stations or a “grab-and-go” café, as well as access to Wi-Fi, are much appreciated amenities for long wait or treatment times.
The College of Dental Medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina used their new Clinical Education Building project as a catalyst to evaluate and re-examine their entire patient experience. Their patient base included a large number from the inner-city, an underserved population.

In an effort to consolidate departments and clinical areas, as well as provide a more intuitive process for their patients, MUSC leadership decided to move to a shared check-in/check-out model. This new shared model not only allows the University to save on the required number of employees, but also improves the patient experience by ensuring that patients understand exactly where to go to check-out, how to exit the building and a familiar face with which to book their next appointment. Reception staff easily gather payment and are able to assist with any other needs. Waiting spaces were also examined. The primary waiting area at the clinic building was designed to have dedicated sub-waiting areas near each specialty. The first floor also provides visitors with private desks/cubicles, working tables for families, couches and refreshment stations.

The results of reexamining their patient experience have been impressive. Five years since opening, MUSC’s dental clinic patient volume has increased by 25% and increased their patient satisfaction scores by 13%, placing them in the 98th percentile.
EXPERIENCE AUDIT QUESTIONS

• Is there a smiling attendee at the front door for patients?

• Do staff/students seem accessible?

• Can staff easily come out from behind the desk to assist guests?

• How easy is it for patients to check in? Check-out?

• How long are your typical wait times?

• What are your waiting room chairs like? Are they comfortable if you need to sit in them for long periods of time?

• Do your waiting spaces accommodate multiple body types/sizes?

• Are there spaces for families to wait together?

• Do you have furniture that allows someone to work while waiting?

• How easy is it for patients to pay for their service?

• Do you provide free parking or other transportation amenities, such as a free bus pass, that make the final departure happy?
3. CREATE A CALMING ENVIRONMENT BY BRINGING FORWARD PATIENT ACCESS POINTS.
To reduce patient anxiety and confusion, locate as many services near the front door as possible. In addition to check-in, check-out and waiting, we recommend exploring options to locate patient care, recovery and patient consult/education adjacent to each other and entirely on one floor if possible. There are many ways to achieve this ideal experience, including moving offices and student educational spaces to upper floors in order to locate patient areas at the first floor, and bringing technology to the patient as much as possible.

To bring technology to the patient, explore the option of decentralizing the radiology department. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including using mobile technology, providing a radiographic x-ray within the operatory environment or providing a panoramic unit next to the pediatric or ortho departments.

An additional benefit to decentralization is that it may reduce staff and patient footsteps, resulting in increased staff efficiency and reduced length of stay for the patient, and possibly reducing the number of waiting spaces needed. Perhaps the best benefit, is that by eliminating the need for patients, students, staff and faculty to frequently move through departments, you can reduce the perception of a busy, chaotic space, ultimately reducing stress for all.
UTHSC’S new 200,000SF center for clinical education exemplifies patient comfort and experience throughout. The University and the design team focused on creating a facility which paid particular attention to the patient experience and located patient services as near to the front door as possible.

Clear wayfinding is found throughout the campus which guides patients to the facility parking, and from parking to the front door. At the entrance, greeters provide any additional information that may be needed. The facility was designed to organize the patient’s visit around the central courtyard. This intentionally provides a positive distraction while maintaining a visual cue of where they are in the building.

Departmental check-in & waiting environments are located off of this central courtyard. In many instances, waiting environments were co-located to provide flexibility and efficiency of seat quantities, allowing for sharing between clinics at peak times. Patient check-out is conveniently located at the exit for scheduling a next appointment and collecting payment. Consultation and patient education spaces are located between reception and the patient-care environments allowing use for patient education/treatment planning or financial discussions. All student, faculty and staff support spaces were placed at the back of the department to provide closer access of patient care spaces to the entry. Placing the support spaces further away from public environments also aids in creating an additional level of security for equipment and materials.

The number of patient stops were intentionally designed to decrease the amount of time travelling throughout the facility. Five key stops were identified: Greeters at front door (may be skipped if familiar with facility); Departmental reception space; Students lead patient to patient care space; Check-out/payment; Leave facility.

To ensure efficiency, a decentralized approach for radiology services was utilized. X-ray capabilities are provided within each department, with a supporting central radiology department for specific visits and procedures. Additional pan-ceph machines are located within Ortho/Pediatrics and Faculty Practice/AEGD/Geriatrics to reduce footsteps for these patients.
EXPERIENCE AUDIT QUESTIONS

• Are your patient spaces located near the front door?

• Are your patient spaces located next to each other?

• Does a typical patient have more than 2-3 stops after arrival?

• Are patients asked to book follow up appointments while onsite?

• Are you providing areas for privacy (i.e. medical information or financial transactions)? Is it easy to have private conversations and consultation?
4.

TAKE CUES FROM HEALTH CARE INDUSTRY BEST PRACTICES.
Today’s patients are acutely aware of their surroundings and quality of care. By creating an enhanced professional environment, you provide an opportunity to educate your students in how to interact with their patients. The health care industry has paid particular attention to ways to create better, safer patient experiences. Here are a few ideas to carry over into your dental clinic experience.

• **Add positive distractions.** Research has shown that positive distractions can play a significant role in promoting health. This can be accomplished simply by providing a wayfinding reference or just adding visual interest to a patient space with artwork or graphic media. Benefits include destressing patients, lowering heart rate and blood pressure, perceived lower wait times, creating less institutional-feeling clinical environments, and even greater comprehension and compliance with medical procedures by patients. Simply put, artwork and/or media can make the viewer feel better.

Explore simple ways to incorporate artwork into your patient spaces, such as including student art from other programs or contacting local artists to see if they would be interested in exhibiting in your waiting and patient spaces. If possible, include infographics which promote health and education. An integration of technology or environmental branding features will help tell your school’s story while also allowing a few minutes of “escape” to stressed patients.

• **Reduce noise as much as possible.** Common in any space that brings together many people and technology, sound levels in dental school clinics can be extremely high. People talking, dental equipment, moving through corridors and many other elements contribute to the source of noise. We know that noisy educational environments distract students and educators. The health care industry has recognized that these noisy environments are not simply something that is just a by-product of public spaces and should simply be accepted. Noisy areas sacrifice privacy and cause stress for everyone involved – especially patients.

We have helped colleges around the country develop comprehensive strategies for sound control by integrating design and behavior recommendations to mitigate the noise in the clinical environments. Here are a few recommendations:

- Changing out basic acoustical ceiling tile for tiles with a high rating of sound absorption.
- Acoustical wall panels to help absorb noise and cut down on the number of hard surfaces where sound can bounce around. This treatment is perfect for waiting areas or spaces where intense focus and quiet is important. This also helps sound transmission between spaces – such as a noisy student lounge and a patient exam space.
- Examine the types of flooring being used. Many flooring materials are designed to reduce noise while still providing durability and easy maintenance. Also, simply changing out wheels on equipment to soft rubber wheels can have a huge impact on noise levels.
- Examine your culture. It’s important to recognize that some noises are a result of operational behaviors and unless this is addressed, design strategies will simply not work. By creating a culture which balances a quiet clinical environment with an educational one, you can reduce patient stress and create a much more relaxing space for dental care.
Recently completed, the new Ray and Tye Noorda Oral Health Sciences Building establishes a new School of Dentistry for the University of Utah. The 80,000 sf facility encompasses cutting edge classrooms, laboratories, and dental clinics.

The building borrows many best practices from the health care industry to achieve a welcoming, calming patient experience. Positive distractions are found in the forms of artwork, including a history and donor wall. Display monitors provide opportunities to tell school stories, success, program and additional monitors within waiting areas are utilized to for educational purposes.

The designers also used architectural elements to create interest. Materials such as terracotta, colored glass, wood and concrete accents, as well as interesting floor patterning provide a contemporary, professional environment for patients. Ample windows not only provide a wash of natural light into all environments, but also panoramic views of the adjacent mountain ranges.

The University also paid attention to sound control and comfort. Linoleum flooring in clinical areas results in a softer step, while waiting areas have carpet and soft seating to reduce sound. These seating areas provide different comfortable options to accommodate a variety of patient types during waiting. The design also includes insulated walls constructed from floor to level above, sealed at top & bottom to eliminate sound transfer. Finally, centralized support spaces, located away from patient care areas, help to reduce cart and material movement, improving efficiency and reducing noise.
EXPERIENCE AUDIT QUESTIONS

• Do waiting patients have artwork to look at or other positive distractions?

• Do patient spaces have access to views outside?

• Have students been trained to have private or sensitive conversations in an open clinical environment?

• Are deliveries and cart movement restricted to off hours in order to reduce congestion?

• Do you provide opportunities for patients to learn more about your school history and/or dental care or procedures?
CONTACT

For further information, please contact Larry Schnuck, Vice President and Higher Education Team Leader at 414.272.2000 or lschnuck@kahlerslater.com

111 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53203
414.272.2000
www.kahlerslater.com

ABOUT KAHLER SLATER

Founded in 1908, Kahler Slater began as an architecture and interior design firm and has grown to become a global, award-winning team of Experience Designers. Our Higher Education team helps colleges and universities around the country transform learning, teaching and student life experiences.

Our insights help colleges and universities attract top students, retain faculty and more effectively incorporate ever-changing pedagogies. We work with our clients to create hands-on and integrated educational experiences by designing learning experiences that engage students, maximize technology and allow for flexibility. The result of our designs is students who are well prepared to become exceptional professionals.