Humanism in Dental Education: A Comparison of Theory, Intention, and Stakeholder Perceptions at a North American Dental School

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Abstract

In today’s dental education environment, a humanistic culture is an expectation for all U.S. dental schools, codified in 2013 by its inclusion in the Commission on Dental Accreditation’s standards for accreditation. The University of the Pacific Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry has made an active commitment to humanism since the mid-1970s. The aim of this study was to determine how well the school’s students and faculty and staff members perceived the school was living up to its formal aspirational values and who was benefitting from the humanistic culture. Using an electronic survey, data were collected from a total of 195 students, faculty members, and staff members in 2014. Respondents were 15% of the 492 full- and part-time faculty members; 9% of the total student population of 540; and 29% of 255 staff members. In the responses, humanism was described as manifest by attributes such as caring, understanding, respect, and compassion. Although the findings confirmed the value of a humanistic culture, some portions of the school’s formal definition and goals, such as good work ethic, professional responsibility, high ethical standards, increasing independence, and attainment of competence, appeared less frequently in responses. Authentic assessment of institutional culture proved challenging. Focus groups offered additional ways to assess how effectively the school lives its core value of humanism. There was recognition that more varied, robust methods were needed to assess institutional alignment with stated goals for a humanistic learning environment.

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Humanistic education is a commitment to educational practice in which all facets of the teaching and learning process give major emphasis to the freedom, value, worth, dignity, and integrity of persons. The word “humanism” is derived from the Latin humanitas, a disposition and compassion for others. Combining Roman and Greek historical emphases, humanitas was used to describe kindness, culture, refinement, and the development of human virtue, in all its forms, to its fullest extent. The word implied characteristics such as understanding, benevolence, compassion, fortitude, judgment, prudence, and love of honor, in a balance of action and reflection.

Although the concept of humanism in reference to a system of education was developed in the 13th and 14th centuries, it has shallow roots in North American dental education. Interest in students’ perceptions of the teaching, learning, and patient care environment has grown since Henzi et al.’s study published in 2005. According to Genn, the Association for Medical Education in Europe (AMEE), an organization 90 countries-strong, regards the power and utility of the learning environment as an important determinant of behavior, affecting student achievement, satisfaction, and success, and emphasized that this climate is “the soul and spirit of the medical school environment and curriculum.”
Today, maintaining a humanistic culture is an expectation for all dental schools in the United States, expressed in the following way in the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) standards: “Dental schools are societies of learners, where graduates are prepared to join a learned and a scholarly society of oral health professionals. A humanistic pedagogy inculcates respect, tolerance, understanding, and concern for others and is fostered by mentoring, advising, and small-group interaction. A dental school environment characterized by respectful professional relationships between and among faculty and students establishes a context for the development of interpersonal skills necessary for learning, for patient care, and for making meaningful contributions to the profession.”

Although humanism is an often-used word, defining it and, more challenging yet, measuring how we live the concept, has proven challenging. The University of the Pacific Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry has made an active commitment to humanism since the mid-1970s. The aim of this study was to determine how well the school’s students and faculty and staff members perceived the school was living up to its formal aspirational values and who was benefiting from the humanistic culture.

**Humanism in Education**

Humanism in modern education traces its roots to the 1960s teaching of psychologist Carl Rogers, who believed that “for a person to grow, they [sic] need an environment that provides them with genuineness (openness and self-disclosure), acceptance (being seen with unconditional positive regard), and empathy (being listened to and understood).” In the context of education, this concept represented a paradigm shift from the narrower goal of academic achievement toward broader goals of self-actualization, fulfilling relationships, interdependence, self-expression, maximizing individual potential, and mutual support. According to Combs, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) codified the concept operationally in 1979 by specifying that a humanistic education accepts the learner’s needs and purposes and customizes experiences to his or her distinctive potential; facilitates self-actualization and a sense of adequacy; fosters skill acquisition necessary for living in a multicultural society, including academic, personal, interpersonal, communicative, and economic proficiency; personalizes educational decisions and practices, including students in the processes democratically; recognizes human feelings, personal values, and perceptions as integral factors in educational processes; develops a learning climate perceived by involved individuals as challenging, understanding, supportive, exciting, and free from threat; and develops in learners genuine concern and respect for the worth of others, as well as skill in conflict resolution.

Almost 40 years later, the humanistic paradigm is no less important. In a critical review of the literature on the kinds of knowledge most important to teachers in the 21st century, Kereluik et al. defined three types of knowledge: foundational (to know), meta (to act), and humanistic (to value) (Figure 1). A humanistic culture acknowledges, according to Aloni, that “unique dignity lies in [the student’s] critical reason, moral sensitivity, creative imagination, autonomous will, and unique personality.” Such a culture prioritizes these dignities and supports the freedom to explore and take risks without fear of intellectual oppression or intimidation.

A humanistic learning environment invites all of its stakeholders—students, staff, and faculty alike—to develop and strengthen not only conceptual knowledge (episteme) and technique (techne), but also phronesis, what Hurst called “the context-dependent, practical common sense needed when we have to make judgments about what is right and wrong.” Former President of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Jordan Cohen described the construct this way: “Professionalism denotes a
way of behaving in accordance with certain normative values, whereas humanism
denotes an intrinsic set of deep-seated convictions about one's obligations toward
others. Humanism is the passion that animates professionalism."¹⁴ Stern defined
humanism as one of four foundational attributes (the others being accountability,
atrulism, and excellence) upon which professionalism is built and emphasized the
necessity of intentionally teaching all four.¹⁵

Culey stressed the importance of a positive culture as a means of guiding an
organization not only in health care and education but also in the business community,
writing that 'every organization has its own unique culture: defined as the set of deeply
embedded, self-reinforcing behaviors, beliefs, and mindset that determine the way we
do things around here.'¹⁶ This culture guides actions and behaviors, communication
and collaboration, efficient decision making, trust, and effective delivery of results with
less need for detailed instructions, protocols, and rules. Shepherding an organization’s
culture is critical. Schneider et al. reported that behavior is shaped by understood
values, beliefs, and assumptions, based on stories, myths, experience, and observed
behaviors that prove to promote success.¹⁷

A humanistic workplace was described by Kaure as well as Margulies and Raia as one
in which coworkers are able to function as human beings with an opportunity to develop
to their full potential.¹⁸,¹⁹ In such a workplace, each person's needs are admired with
resulting personalization rather than standardization. Goals are understood, and work is
perceived as exciting and challenging. Stakeholders have the ability to influence the
organization’s development, operation, and environment and thus feel vested in its
success.

Studies have found that patients who perceive they are being treated humanistically
enjoy better health outcomes.¹⁴,²⁰–²³ Role modeling was found by Weissmann et al. to
be one of the strongest ways of teaching humanistic values in a health care learning
environment, with the best faculty members' being highly aware of their prominence as
role models.²⁰ In that study, learners recognized best practices in simple faculty
behaviors including nonverbal communication such as tone of voice, eye contact, touch,
sitting at patient eye level, including and respecting the patient in decision making,
eliciting and accommodating patients’ preferences, and identifying shared background
or experiences. In support of the assertion that students who are treated humanistically
will care for their patients and team members in the same way, authors have argued
that these kinds of interactions are important to positive relationships among faculty,
staff, and students.²²,²⁴,²⁵

At the University of the Pacific Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, a commitment to
humanism has informed the learning environment since the mid-1970s (Table 1). The
institution expresses the concept in the following way: "Our view of humanism is based
upon honest communication of clear expectations along with positive support for diligent
effort. Although kindness is valued, humanism is not interpreted to mean softness,
weakness, or superficial niceness. In fact, humanism places great responsibility on
each member of the dental school community. In order for this approach to work, faculty
members must be models of the profession’s highest standards, and they must teach in
a way that encourages and energizes students. Students, in turn, are expected to set
very high standards, to work hard, and to take personal responsibility for their own
learning process."²⁶

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<td>Humanistic student-faculty interaction at Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, University of the Pacific</td>
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Dean Emeritus Arthur A. Dugoni, in concordance with the historical definition of
humanitas, reminded us, "We grow people, and along the way they become doctors."²⁷
The school expresses humanism as the first of its seven articulated core values and
emphasizes purposeful consideration of behaviors that matter to the community of
learners.²⁸,²⁹ In admissions data, students frequently cite the humanistic culture as a
priority in their decision to attend the school. Faculty and staff members appear to
equally value the humanistic culture in their ongoing relationship with the school. In
anticipation of a 2012 Strategic Plan update, members of the school community were
surveyed to understand how they perceived the school was living up to its core values,
including humanism. The results are shown in Table 2. The current study sought to
delve more deeply into the perceptions of the school’s stakeholders.
Methods

The research protocol for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects at the University of the Pacific prior to distribution of the survey instrument (#15–42). An electronic survey format through Qualtrics online software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) was used to explore students’ and faculty and staff members’ perceptions of the humanistic culture at the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry in 2014. The author-designed survey consisted of ten demographic, rating scale, and open-response (free response, no character or word limit) items. A link to the survey was inserted into an introductory email sent to all students and members of the staff and faculty (including administrators) on behalf of the research group. Responses were accepted for 27 days. An email reminder, which included a link to the survey, was sent on day 12 to increase response.

The results were analyzed in Qualtrics and Excel. Descriptive statistics (percentages, average rating, and standard deviation) were used to describe the overall characteristics of the respondents and the responses. Open response items were consolidated into themes, and representative statements were selected, following Wiersma and Jurs’s guidelines.

Focus groups were convened to explore additional outcomes measures that might help assess to what extent the school is living up to its core value of humanism. Focus groups consisted of a convenience sample of randomly grouped, self-selected faculty and staff members attending a school development day. The four focus groups were conducted on March 17, 2015. Each was led by a single faculty member, two of whom are authors of this article. The groups had an average of ten participants each. Ideas and comments expressed in the focus groups were recorded and grouped into themes.

Results

A total of 195 survey responses were received: 48 from students, 73 from the faculty, and 74 from the staff. Student class cohorts were fairly evenly represented: 34% of total student respondents were first-year students, 23% were second-year students, and 43% were third-year (senior) students. Participants were 15% of total full- and part-time faculty of 492; 9% of the total student population of 540; and 29% of the total staff of 255.

Describing a Humanistic Culture and Its Perceived Value

When asked to rate the culture of humanism at the school on a four-point scale from 1=lowest to 4=highest, 135 participants responded with an average rating of 3.20: students (n=28, average rating 3.32), faculty (n=62, average rating 3.32), and staff (n=45, average rating 2.96). There were no ratings of the lowest value of one. While the standard deviation for faculty (SD 0.65) and staff (SD 0.64) were similar, the student response revealed a larger standard deviation (SD 0.72), indicating wide-ranging views (Figure 2).
culture: human feelings and values, challenging environment free of threat, and respect, evidenced by comments such as “Having a strong interest in or concern for human welfare” and “Respect, high expectations of self and others, inclusive, considerate, celebratory (of achievement), positive.” Components of humanism that respondents valued most clustered around relational concepts, empathy and concern, and character, as noted in the following comments: “Respecting each other, regardless of position within the organization. Helping each other to create a working environment that has a high trust level, frequent demonstrations and acknowledgment of appreciation and gratitude for jobs well done, and, mostly, an environment that encourages and rewards people for helping others to become outstanding”; “Humanism is not ‘being nice’”; and “Humanism should mean that we are honest, moral, and compassionate with each other, while holding each other to a high standard.”

Benefit to Stakeholders

To determine the perceptions of benefit to each stakeholder group, participants were asked to rate, on a four-point scale, how much humanism benefitted their own group and the other groups. Overall, respondents reported that humanism benefitted students (n=114, average rating 3.68) more than the faculty (n=111, average rating 3.41) and staff (n=117, average rating 3.40).

Overwhelmingly, all three groups rated students as the greatest beneficiaries of a humanistic environment with students’ rating themselves the highest (average rating 3.76, SD 0.54). Staff and faculty members rated each other as receiving greater benefits from the humanistic environment than their own group (Figure 2). However, the low rating for staff had the largest standard deviation, indicating a larger range of opinion in each group regarding how much benefit the staff derived from humanism.

Via an open-ended question, participants were asked to describe in what ways humanism benefited each of the three groups. Concerning benefit to students, the themes of learning atmosphere and development of values were reported. Learning atmosphere described how students were perceived to be treated in both classroom and clinic, including fairness and respect, noted by such comments as these: “Students are not afraid to expose their fears, perceived weaknesses, and inadequacies to faculty. They are not afraid to ask for help”; and “I was trained by faculty at another dental school who would sometimes judge students by factors other than competence.” The second theme—development of values—described perceived inculcation of values and behaviors representative of an ethical dentist, illustrated in the following comment: “Students are encouraged to take a big picture approach to their learning in that they are taught to think how their actions affect others and the community at large.”

Benefits to the faculty fell into two themes: the teaching and learning atmosphere, defined as how faculty members view engagement with students and colleagues; and development and collegial interaction, defined as actualized growth related to the work environment. One participant commented, “Faculty are encouraged to build relationships of respect for one another. Fostering an atmosphere of transparency and the sharing of ideas and information to optimize the educational experience of the student.”

Responses regarding perceived benefits to the staff clustered around three themes: work climate, attitude, and no benefit. The work climate included a caring environment, growth and development, teamwork, communication, good relationships, family atmosphere, respect, and appreciation. Attitudes influenced by a humanistic culture were represented in responses most broadly as respect and appreciation. Sample comments were as follows: “If staff are treated well and are part of the decision making process they are more likely to follow the direction of leadership. And this is key to achieving goals”; and “Respect begets respect, and keeping a generally positive attitude relieves stress.” Approximately 7% of the respondents stated that humanism offered staff no benefit, exemplified by this comment: “Humanism does not apply to the staff anymore…. The culture has changed and … lack of humanism and respect for the staff is very evident. Humanism still applies to students and their interaction with faculty and patients.”

Regarding supporting and maintaining a humanistic culture, respondents reported believing that the dean is responsible for setting the tone and that department chairs and the upper administration operationalize values. They also perceived that the extended school community has a role in maintaining the culture.

Alternative Measures of Operational Humanism

In an effort to explore additional methods to evaluate how the school was living its core value of humanism, the faculty and staff members in focus groups were invited to
discuss and present ideas regarding assessments. Two primary areas surfaced in these discussions: formal assessments, and observed behaviors such as patient satisfaction, alumni giving, and employee longevity among others (Table 3).

Discussion

The CODA standards and previous articles in health professions education provide a solid theoretical framework for how a humanistic education in dentistry can positively impact teaching and learning while offering direct benefits to patient care outcomes.\textsuperscript{6,14,21–23,32} The business community has also acknowledged the value and resulting benefits of humanism to organizational culture.\textsuperscript{15–19}

Analysis of our survey results provided a snapshot view of responding stakeholders' perceptions of our school’s core value of humanism. They described humanism as being manifest in attributes such as caring, mutual respect, involvement, inclusion, and compassion, in agreement with Cohen’s definition.\textsuperscript{14} However, when their responses were compared to the school’s formal definition and description of related features, it was apparent that, over time, the concept may have become oversimplified. “Caring” and “respect,” the most frequently occurring words in the free text responses, while offering a positive operational influence, lack the more nuanced, demanding, and inspirational aspects of humanism expressed in the school’s guiding documents.\textsuperscript{26–28}

Goals such as strong work ethic, constructive and proactive feedback, academic achievement, excellence, high ethical standards, professional responsibility, attainment of competence, and independence were less apparent in the responses.

These findings underscore the value of not only defining the organizational culture desired but, more importantly, intentionally and consistently communicating and supporting it by explicit and implicit actions at all levels. It is clear that perceptions of the humanistic climate vary among stakeholder groups. Monitoring these dynamic perceptions and reacting accordingly are imperative. The need to revisit and emphasize the responsibility that humanism places on each member of the community was revealed. Developing a more robust system of assessing the school’s humanistic culture is needed to help the organization operationalize stated values more fully and ideally. The presence and value of humanism in a professional education setting can be challenging to evaluate and implement. We were reminded of the challenge through this survey and encourage other institutions to define aspirational values with respect to humanism and create mindful actions to achieve those goals.

Open-response questions have the limitations of information being filtered through individual perceptions and/or researcher interpretation. Given that both the authors and the respondents were from a single institution, the school’s academic culture may have influenced perceptions, responses, and interpretations. There may also have existed a bias of “social desirability” broadly described as a tendency to deny socially undesirable traits in favor of more socially desirable ones.\textsuperscript{33} It might further be argued that such bias might be demonstrated by lack of response to a question or questions. Given that the overall response rate and sample size (n=194) were small, generalizing results to represent all members of this school or other institutions is not possible without further study.

Conclusion

We approached this study as an opportunity to explore the theoretical concepts of humanism in modern dental education and, with a snapshot of one institution, compare stakeholders’ perceptions and interpretation of how well the school lives its value of humanism relative to its formal definition and description. The findings reinforced the value of a humanistic culture to support a strong learning environment. Each school must develop a clear set of embedded, self-reinforcing behaviors that are important to its members and must implement formal, regular, ongoing measures to guide alignment with institutional goals. We learned that while this school has a clear set of aspirational values, the everyday relational aspects of humanism were perceived as diminished at the time of this study. We believe that the introduction and inculcation of humanistic values for all stakeholders must be reinforced explicitly and in unspoken actions throughout the institution. Therefore, the results of this study revealed the need to reinvigorate explicit actions starting at the administrative level with the understanding...
that all constituents play a role in maintaining the highest level of humanistic values. Our hope is that the findings of this study add to the discussion of humanistic learning communities, which will allow all dental schools to better prepare excellent practitioners for the evolving future of health care.

REFERENCES


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