

What are the best things about attending VCU Dental School?

VCU is a solid, well-rounded school with particular emphasis on quality clinical education. Most other students seem to really like it here even if there are some things they complain about. The dental school and VCU Health in general have an excellent reputation in the community, meaning the patient pool is very strong. It can be difficult to get some requirements (mostly endodontics) finished *if you don't stay on top of things*, but most students complete significantly more than their graduation requirements for most procedures. The opportunity is there as long as you actually take cases instead of being lazy.

We pick up a handpiece just a couple weeks into school and get plenty of practice and lab time (students don't usually come in for extra practice outside of schedule time, except for a few practice sessions before lab practical exams); otherwise students finish all of their lab work during lab time. I've heard members of my class talk about their friends at other schools that are still just doing waxing and stuff at the end of first year and won't pick up a handpiece until D2, which sounds crazy to me with how much experience we've already had going into D2. Also, almost all our lab faculty are awesome. Super helpful and approachable, they try hard to be available and make sure to spend some one-on-one time with each of us during lab sessions.

I will note that we don't get anywhere near the didactic education that I know students get at med-school integrated dental schools like UConn, Columbia, etc. This might be a small con for prospective OMFS who need to prepare for the CBSE, but it's a pro for anyone else because it means you spend less time and effort learning stuff you'll never use again and more on dental-related stuff.

Still, the majority of lecturers are quite good. Anatomy was an awesome experience with great faculty. Histology and Pathology are both high-quality courses. Some of the lecturers (particularly the cardio units) in physiology were some of the best I've ever had.

As a pre-dent, I always felt there was a weird stigma about even thinking you might want to specialize, and it also sounded like VCU had a reputation for wanting to produce general dentists. That might kind of be true, but they're also one of the schools with every specialty residency in one place. Since starting, no one has ever said there's any kind of preference for producing generalists, only encouragement for shadowing in the various clinics and getting a wide variety of experience. Specialist faculty are extremely welcoming towards students and want everyone who's interested to spend time with them. Dr. Abubaker (author of OMFS Secrets, which probably every resident in the country has a copy of) personally invited me just a couple weeks into D1 to come to the OR with him and the residents when I ran into him in the hall and asked him some questions. A couple of years ago, 10/11 D4s matched into OMFS, and plenty into other specialty programs, so I feel confident saying VCU doesn't have any problems with people being interested in specializing early on.

Lectures are recorded, so lots of people don't come to classes that don't officially require attendance. Whether or not you go to class, it's reeeeeeeally nice to be able to watch it later at double speed.

Our classmates all seem to get along well. It's fun to all be together in one big class: a bunch of intelligent, like-minded, interesting people, doing the same things at the same time (unlike undergrad where everyone has different majors and different goals).

I want to emphasize that despite ranting a little about some dumb things below, most faculty are seriously excellent, and I've really enjoyed most of our classes. I've learned a ton and developed new skills, and really enjoyed dental school so far. All the upperclassmen consistently say it only gets better starting D2 and especially once you get into clinic at the end of D2.

What are the worst things about attending VCU Dental School?

I can and will go into some negative aspects, but before I do that, I want to **strongly emphasize** again that they are the sort of thing I think would be commonly encountered at almost any other dental school in the country, i.e. the way some faculty run their courses can be frustrating. These aren't the kinds of things that would make me think the quality of education is worse than anywhere else, but rather these are some specific examples of the kinds of things that are obnoxious about higher education and dental school in general.

Subjective grading can suck, but I really think this an inherent problem with dental school. Some students felt that their practical grades did not align with the positive feedback they previously received from faculty. Some students (not a ton of people, but at least a couple) failed more than one practical on something really small, though I don't think anyone in my class failed a practical course overall. I would completely overhaul operative lab's grading system if I could.

Two classes, Physiology and Micro/Immunology, were extremely frustrating for the same reason: exams questions often did not align with what was presented in lecture. One Micro exam only consisted of 19 questions, and 9 of them were thrown out because the questions weren't even taught in class or were poorly written. Most egregiously, one lecturer legitimately seemed to be exhibiting dementia symptoms on multiple lecture days: making no sense, repeating himself, impossible to follow for 2+ hours at a time. On the exam, he asked multiple questions about rabies virus which he'd never given a lecture on! Those questions were thrown out, but even when he continued to lecture after this exam, *he never even gave a rabies lecture*. Similar things happened in physiology: we would study extremely hard, doing literally nothing else for 2-3 days before an exam, only to be confronted by questions that seemed to *technically* be asking about things from class, but that certainly weren't representative of what we were told was important or what was emphasized in class. **In the end**, they run statistical analysis on all the exams and throw out bad questions, then curve the course if necessary. It's not like everyone is getting C's or barely passing; many student's got

A's in both courses. The point is that some (definitely not all) classes feel like you're playing weird games to get a good grade, even if you feel confident that you know the subject well. In my opinion, there's no real reason this should happen; this should be easily avoidable. The experience is frustrating, even if it doesn't have any real negative consequences because it's curved fairly at the end. Also, we complained a lot about these problems and supposedly admin is trying to actually do something to make it better for next year.

Another probably-any-dental-school problem is foreign faculty with strong accents. Some are awesome people who love to help and love being teachers but can be really difficult to follow. Their PowerPoints aren't always clear either, so studying for exams they contribute to can be somewhat difficult.

Last major complaint are the pointless classes. Luckily these are mostly easy, 1 credit classes. Again, I think every dental and med school has classes like this, so it's not a huge deal, but it's hard not to feel like you're wasting your time. I would say that each of these classes should be good in principle but fail miserably in execution. "Behavioral Science" might as well be called Hippy Feelings 101: barely any discussion of actual psychological principles, more like self-help books and weird cheesy role-playing. We spend time practicing pretend conversations that are supposed to make us better at interacting with patients. "Evidence-Based Dentistry" would more properly be called Poorly-Explained Stats, though I admit it was good to learn more about the hierarchy of evidence and different types of research studies, though these moments were stuck between time spent bogged down in unnecessary specifics and formulas we weren't tested on anyway.

What do students need to know/what do you wish you knew before attending VCU Dental School?

The major theme of dental school is just being ready to manage your time. There's such a huge amount of material that, despite advice against cramming, you basically end up cramming for every test. The difference between VCU and undergrad is that you'll have 1 or 2 tests almost every week and each could cover ~200 slides of material, so you have to cram for 2-3 days before if you want an A. In the larger classes (phys, anatomy, histology, path), the hardest-working students are basically on their laptops reading PowerPoints from when they get up to when they go to sleep.

In contrast to how horrible the above may sound, it's really not that bad. You lose free time, but that doesn't mean you don't have any at all. You have to make sure you put in the work, but you have plenty of time to get it all done. It's also super dependent on the grades you want: many students in my class are 100% certain they *don't* want to specialize, and they have tons of free time.

Despite the allure of more free time, if you go to VCU and you think at all that you *might* want to specialize, go absolutely insane studying and do everything you possibly can to get the A in the 4-6 credit Big Classes, starting with anatomy first week of school. I've

already heard multiple people say they don't know any more if they'll be able to specialize even if they decided they wanted to. A small handful of B's in small classes won't kill you, but the big classes are difficult and they'll drop your GPA hard, and it's much more difficult to recover from 6 credits of B than it is study enough to get the A. You can relax later if you decide you don't want to specialize, but don't deprive yourself of possibilities.