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They don't just make the mold, they break the mold

Durham Tech dental lab program called one of the best in the country

By STANLEY B. CHAMBERS JR, Staff Writer

A dental laboratory technician does more than just make teeth nice and neat.

That's how Michael Keeter, 25, explained his future profession while taking a break from work on a three-unit bridge -- replacing a missing tooth while maintaining the space between the two adjacent ones -- at Durham Technical Community College.

Keeter's school breaks the mold, according to the Journal of Dental Technology, the publication of the National Association of Dental Laboratories. Durham Tech's dental laboratory technology program was honored as one of the top three in the country by the journal in its June/July issue.

The schools were chosen based on students' grade point averages, student-to-teacher ratio and the program's reputation. Durham Tech's program, in existence since the school opened in 1961, has received multiple state honors. This, however, is its first time being nationally recognized.

It is the only such program in the Carolinas and one of 22 accredited by the American Dental Association, program director Michael Patrick said. There are 31 schools across the country with dental laboratory technology programs, according to the dental lab association.

"We have known that we were one of the best programs, but [being recognized] has been very exciting for us," said instructor Alberto Camacho. "It's an incentive for the faculty to continue working hard."

Dental lab technicians create replacements for natural teeth and oral corrective devices, using waxes, plastics, porcelains and other materials. Lab technicians work with dental manufacturers and suppliers in commercial dental laboratories and dental offices. Operating their own labs is not uncommon.

Just about any dental lab technician can get a job due to high demand, Patrick said. The average pay starts at \$14 an hour.

But the job isn't for everyone. Students must be artistic, able to pay attention to detail, and have good hand-eye coordination. One bad crown can cause teeth to shift, which can create problems with jaw muscles and eventually lead to a root canal, Keeter said. The Chapel Hill resident was a pipe line welder when he started attending dental conventions with his fiancée, a dental hygienist. With hopes of owning a business that would showcase his creative side, the profession seemed like a good fit.



Staff Photos by Shawn Rocco

Carlos Austin uses an inlay wax on an articulator machine before the actual casting of a mandibular first molar during a Dental Lab Tech class at Durham Technical Community College. The dental program was named one of the top three programs in the country by the Journal of Dental Technology.

BY THE NUMBERS:

Length of program: 21 months

Number of students per semester: 20

Average student GPA: 3.2

Percentage of students with jobs upon graduation: 95

Percentage of students enrolled who graduate: 55

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"I'd never thought I'd work in health care, much less the dental field," Keeter said. "I really enjoy it. I see it more as an art form, but at the same time you get to restore people's smile and their confidence."

Patrick says he believes the program's recognition is due to the success of grads like Julien Warren.

After graduating from Durham Tech in 2003, Warren, 28, obtained a certification as a master ceramist from the UCLA's School of Dentistry and worked at an Idaho laboratory before being contacted by Ivoclar Vivadent, a manufacturer of materials for preventative, restorative and prosthetic dentistry. Warren is now the company's territory sales manager.

"I go into labs every day and all are looking for technicians," Warren said. "It's like a hidden industry."