

Kayla Thomsen, Columbia '27

How do you work with or lead a team?

When leading a team, my primary responsibility is to identify the areas where each team member thrives and create an environment where they can do just that. Every individual operates best under a unique set of conditions and I believe that effective leadership requires adapting those differences rather than expecting everyone to conform to a single style. Some team members might operate best with autonomy and occasional check-ins while others appreciate frequent communication, reminders, and structured expectations.

The foundation for creating these environments is truly knowing the people I work with. I make a conscious effort to learn about their interests beyond dental school, their passion projects, and hidden talents. Understanding who they are as individuals helps me place them in roles and tasks where they can shine and feel fulfilled.

More than anything else, I believe strong leadership is rooted in honesty, trust, and open communication. The most successful teams not only celebrate their achievements, but also openly acknowledge challenges and setbacks so the whole group can learn and grow together. I strive to cultivate a team culture that recognizes collective accomplishments while also valuing each individual contribution that makes them possible. I want my team to feel comfortable offering me feedback, knowing that I am just as committed to improving as I am to supporting them. By fostering transparency and a shared sense of purpose, I hope to build teams that feel supported, valued, and motivated to do their best work.

What leadership experiences have equipped you for the District Trustee role?

Serving as the Events Chair for ASDA District 2 has been an incredibly formative leadership experience. Working closely with Joshua Velazquez has strengthened my understanding of the complexities of organizing events, initiatives, and communication across five dental schools. From the earliest stages of planning for our Summer Leadership Retreat, I quickly learned the importance of proactive organization, securing dates well in advance, and anticipating the realities of demanding dental school schedules. Despite these challenges, the retreat was a massive success, bringing together students from across the district to celebrate their commitment to ASDA and strengthen their leadership foundation.

The retreat solidified a bond that would have been challenging to build virtually strict-wide initiatives. For instance, after hearing from Nishi Joshi, an NYU student and chair of District 2's Outreach Committee, about her partnership with the Bowery Mission, I felt compelled to not only participate but mobilize nearly a third of Columbia's incoming class to participate as well. Moments like this highlighted how meaningful connection and shared purpose can multiply impact.

As I prepare for this year's District 2 Meeting, the months of planning, tracking contracts, securing vendors and sponsors, and envisioning the impact of the conference have reshaped me as a leader. This role has pushed me to think creatively, manage time with intention, communicate effectively across institutions, and always lead with collaboration at the forefront. I feel better equipped than ever to support, empower, and unite our district as Trustee.

Why are you interested in the District Trustee role and what do you hope to accomplish in this position?

It was a happy accident that landed me at my first ASDA conference. I'll admit, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from a National Leadership Conference and I doubted whether I should attend. But after the keynote, I knew I was in the right place. Since then, ASDA has empowered me to find my voice, lead with conviction, and face the challenges of dental school with confidence. I want every dental student who needs that same sense of belonging, purpose, and inspiration to have the opportunity to experience it.

As District Trustee, I hope to ignite that enthusiasm across our district by sharing the power of ASDA's community, advocacy, and lifelong professional unity with students who may not yet realize the transformative power of organized dentistry. As Chapter Vice President, I saw firsthand what intentional engagement can do when our "Why ASDA?" bagel breakfast resulting in a 200% increase in D1 applications to attend NLC. Students are searching for exactly what ASDA offers; our job is to make sure they know exactly where and how to find it.

I also look forward to representing our district nationally, learning from leaders in organized dentistry, and contributing thoughtfully to conversation about the future of our profession. The ADA and ASDA have long shaped dentistry, and I hope to help translate national priorities into meaningful action and accessible opportunities for every school in District 2. My goal is to strengthen collaboration, amplify student voices, and ensure our district feels united, inspired, and empowered.

What are 2-3 issues important to dental students?

In every aspect of their lives, dental students today are grappling with significant wellness challenges. Foremost among these is financial wellness. With ongoing debates around student loan reform and changing models of dental practice, many students are confronting uncertainty about their financial futures. Those who once envisioned a life of sole-provider private practice dentistry are slowly realizing that the quaint practices of Main Street America appear vastly different in the 21st century. This financial stress often spills into every area of their lives, hindering their ability to focus fully on academics, maintain healthy relationships, and plan confidently for their futures.

Alongside financial concerns, the need for mentorship has become increasingly critical. As new dental schools emerge across the country as well as in Puerto Rico, many students are navigating their education and early career stages without the benefit of an established alumni network. This absence of experienced guidance can leave students feeling isolated and uncertain about how to transition from dental school into professional practice. Mentorship offers a vital support system to help students build confidence, develop clinical skills, and explore diverse career paths in an evolving field.

Together, these issues - of financial wellness and the search for meaningful mentorship - shape much of the dental student experience today. Addressing them holistically is essential to fostering a resilient, well-prepared generation of future dentists.