

Bree Zhang

Candidate for Speaker of the House

Columbia University College of Dental Medicine, New York, NY

2027

How do you work with or lead a team?

I lead by creating structured guidance but encouraging my team's unique leadership within that structure. For instance, this past year, our Council on Advocacy organized a "Donut Forget to Vote" voter registration drive and achieved over 1,420 submissions. This success was mostly due to the incredible leadership of district and chapter LLs--hosting events and finding unique incentives to get their chapters registered. I worked with my council to design the contest and provide materials/instructions and resources, but I let LCs take charge in contacting their fellow LLs and catering their communication with their district specific updates (state registration deadlines). In turn, LLs followed by taking charge on the local level.

A key to leadership is understanding your team's strengths and weaknesses. That's why leadership is like "painting:" you must first understand the different shades, hues, and mixtures of paints in order to know where to place them on a canvas. Last year, when I was organizing a collaboration between ASDA, ADEA, and SNDA to jumpstart the "Lessons in a Lunchbox" Program, I sat down with members of each respective organization to identify what they wanted to do the most and what suited their organization the best: SNDA recruited schools, ADEA refined curricula, and ASDA organized volunteers and logistics.

While I heavily value organized timelines and action plans, leading is embracing unexpected challenges, turning moments like "technical difficulties" into opportunities for humor and bonding. Celebrating milestones with my team, I hope to strike a balance between hard work and joy!

What leadership experiences have equipped you for the Speaker of the House role?

National level: I am the Chair of the ASDA National Council on Advocacy, interfacing with legislative coordinators and legislative liaisons on the district and chapter level, learning about issues spanning licensure concerns to workforce shortages to student loans. My experience on a National Council allows me to better advise the work of council and committee members.

District level: I serve as District 2 Chief of Operations, which has given me on-the-ground experience of coordinating cabinet members, monitoring their progress (from picnics to panels to social media), and working closely with my district trustee to realize their vision for the 2024-2025 year.

Local Level: Beyond my work as ASDA Chapter Advocacy Chair, I served as Class of 2026 President in Columbia for 2 years, interfacing regularly with deans, admin, and students. This role trained me well in team management and delegation, giving me a glimpse of common student concerns, particularly relating to student burnout and faculty workforce shortages.

I also see Speaker as a "connector." My appointments on the ADA National Fluoridation Advisory Council, ADA Give Vets a Smile Council, and the NYSDA Substance Use and Well-being Committee allow me to building relations and serve as a liaison to allied government organizations on federal and state levels. My spirit for collaboration also extends beyond dental organizations: having served previously as the American Public Health Association Oral Health Section Liaison, I planned joint events with ASDA to bridge the gap between dental advocacy and public health impact (Medicaid coverage, student loans, opioids).

What are 2-3 issues important to dental students and/or the position of speaker?

Fluoridation: the recent appointment of RFK Jr and the recommendations of removal of community water fluoridation might exacerbate disparities and increase the burden of oral disease in our communities. There is a lot of misinformation regarding fluoride, and many students are grappling with how to talk to their family, friends, and patients about fluoride, so I've worked to create an infographic addressing common FAQ:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5ik2aCr81D/?img_index=1

Student Loans: 2/3 of dental graduates start careers owing \$300,000 student loans with interest rates up to 9.5-10.5%, limiting career choices, location of future practice, and creating workforce shortages in places that need the most care. That is why I advocate for legislation like the REDI Act (allowing dental/medical students to defer interest and payments while in residency) and Dental Loan Repayment Assistance (helping offset income for full-time faculty on loan-repayment programs) to not only reduce the burden on new grads but also alleviate on faculty to address workforce shortages within dental schools:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5ik2aCr81D/?img_index=5

Burnout: 17-22% of dental students experience burnout, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment. It does not end in dental school: an ADA survey reports that 36% of dentists feel defeated, wanted to quit dentistry at least several times a month and 82% felt some type of major career stress. With the NYSDA Substance Use and Well-being Committee, I've worked to brainstorm wellness initiatives to counteract burnout and provide resources for mental health support--both for students and dentists.