

Mentoring: A Professional Responsibility

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Abstract

Dental and dental hygiene students were surveyed to determine how many students had participated in high school or college career exploration courses sponsored/supported by Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) School of Dentistry. The participants were asked to identify which aspects of the programs were the most influential in shaping their exploration of a dental or dental hygiene career and why they decided to apply to the dental or dental hygiene program. These aspects included the availability and the cost of the courses, lecture content, hands-on activities in the laboratory, observations in dental offices, mentoring activities of dentists, dental hygienists, dental/dental hygiene students, and perceived value for applicant competitiveness. The faculty evaluated their level of participation in relation to teaching responsibilities and time commitment. An analysis of the direct and indirect costs to the school was examined. Results of the surveys indicated that between 20-42% of the entering classes had participated in one or more career exploration activities or programs. Participants identified mentoring relationships with their current dentist and dental hygienist as the most important factor in determining their decision to choose dentistry or dental hygiene as a career. Observations in dental offices, encouragement from a dental and/or dental hygiene student, hands-on activities, and repetitive positive career experiences were also significant factors.

Keywords: Mentoring, dental careers, career decision-making

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the number of qualified applicants to dental schools has fluctuated widely. Currently there appears to be an adequate number of qualified dental applicants with twice as many applicants to enrollee positions, but the total number of applicants has declined slightly since 1997. To ensure there is an adequate pool of dental professionals to meet the oral healthcare needs of the public in the future, dental school administrators as well as organized dentistry need to know how and why students make their decision to pursue a professional dental/dental hygiene career. Identifying the most influential activities should have a positive affect on the applicant pool and allow dental hygiene/dental schools and professional organizations to target their recruitment efforts to those that work.¹



There are several reasons why dentists and dental hygienists should be concerned about this important mentoring role. Workforce projections for dentists and dental hygienists indicate severe shortages in many areas in the United States. Dental professionals have a unique opportunity to recruit individuals with characteristics that are necessary for healthcare providers, thus, guaranteeing a continuing supply of competent professionals. In addition, many young people begin exploring careers in junior high school when they are having positive interactions with dentists, often in the orthodontist's chair.²

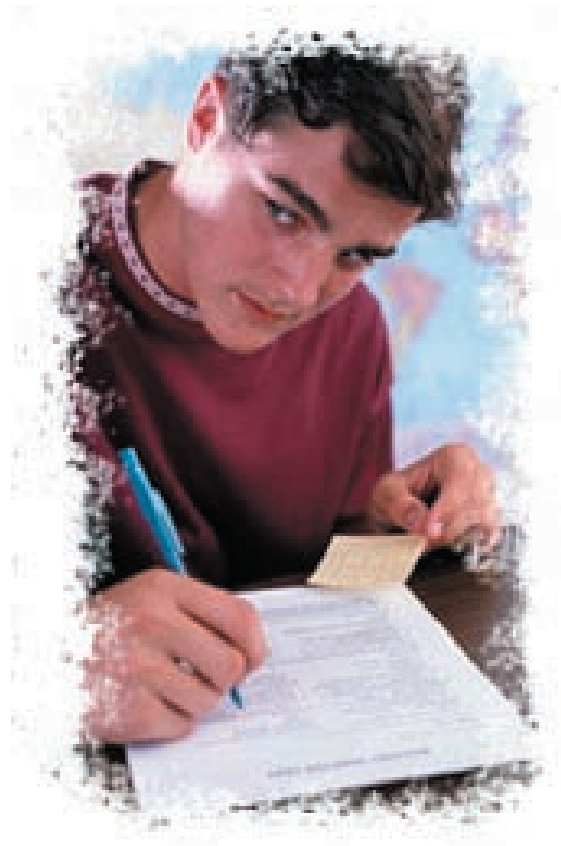
This paper describes a survey of 336 dental and dental hygiene students regarding the factors they considered in choosing a career in dentistry.

Methods

Career exploration surveys were distributed during the 2001-2002 academic year to all matriculated dental and dental hygiene students at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) School of Dentistry. (Figure 1)

A brief explanation about the purpose of the survey and a review of the career exploration courses sponsored by OHSU School of Dentistry was given to each group of students during a regularly scheduled class. The surveys were completed and collected during that class period.

Conclusions were drawn from the percentages tabulated and from the written comments. Since all students (dental and dental hygiene) are required to complete some form of career exploration prior to the admissions process, all students answered question #11 in the survey.



CAREER EXPLORATION SURVEY

Instructions: Please complete this survey, if you have participated in any of the career exploration classes sponsored or co-sponsored by OHSU School of Dentistry.

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| Dental | Dental Hygiene |
| ____ Freshman | ____ Junior |
| ____ Sophomore | ____ Senior |
| ____ Junior | |
| ____ Senior | |

- | High School | College |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dental Explorer Post | <input type="checkbox"/> Dental Careers Institute at OHSU |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Benson High School Health Career Program | <input type="checkbox"/> OSU Biology 199 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dental Careers Institute | <input type="checkbox"/> PSU Aspects of Dentistry/Biology 199 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other/please specify _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> UO Biology 199/Special Studies |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Univ. of Portland/Career Exploration |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> George Fox/Career Exploration |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Career Fairs/National College Fair |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other/ please specify _____ |

No Influence Some Influence Great Influence

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

No Influence Some Influence Great Influence

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- No Influence Some Influence Great Influence
- 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Results

The overall response rate was 76% (256/336), and there was no significant difference in the response rate between the classes or among the groups (dental and dental hygiene students). The survey differentiated between those students who had attended OHSU career exploration courses and similar courses presented at other institutions. All students, regardless of whether they attended OHSU classes, were asked to indicate the “most influential activity” affecting their career choice.

The results of the survey indicated that 61% of the students participated in one or more career exploration courses sponsored by OHSU either in high school or college. The majority of the students attended these career exploration courses during their college career (76%) rather than high school.

Table 1. Participation in career exploration activities.

Percent of Participation	Career Exploration Activities
61	One or more activities sponsored by Oregon Health & Science University School of Dentistry.
76	Participated in career exploration activities during their college career.

Students were asked to evaluate which specific activities in the courses were influential in shaping their decision to pursue a career in dentistry or dental hygiene. The availability of the courses, the lecture content, and perceived value of the activity were the least influential, while participating in clinically-oriented activities and interaction with students were the most influential. The factor ranked as most important was the “hands-on” activities in the dental laboratory.

All students, whether they attended an OHSU career course or courses at other institutions, were asked to indicate “the most influential activity” affecting their career choice. More than half of the students (52%) identified mentoring activities by dentists or dental hygienists as the most influential, with 11% indicating that career exploration courses and mentoring by students (12%) were most influential. College/career fairs and other miscellaneous activities were less influential.

Table 2. Percent of responding students that rated the following as the most influential career choice activity.

Percent of Participation	Career Exploration Activities
52	Mentoring by a dentist or dental hygienist
11	Career exploration courses
12	Mentoring by dental and dental hygiene students
5	Career and college fairs
20	Miscellaneous activities

Discussion

1. Dental and dental hygiene students will participate in organized career exploration courses/classes, and the majority of students take advantage of these opportunities during their college careers.
2. "Hands-on" activities in the laboratory were the most influential activities in career exploration courses followed by clinical experiences.
3. Mentoring relationships with dentists and dental hygienists were identified as the most influential activities when exploring a dental or dental hygiene career. Career exploration classes and mentoring activities with current dental or dental hygiene students were also highly influential.
4. Dental institutions, organized dentistry, dental practitioners, and participation fees absorb the cost of these programs. Faculty and staff are expected to volunteer their time and expertise.



Overall, students indicated the most effective career exploration activities were the interactions they had with dental and dental hygiene professionals. A search of the literature found numerous articles in the dental, various healthcare professional, education, and counseling journals that support these findings.²⁻⁹



This kind of documentation places a great deal of the responsibility on the dentist and the dental hygienist to provide information, demonstrate their skills, support interested individuals, and provide easy access to recruitment materials. Many of the respondents told stories of the visits to the orthodontist office, the discussions with dental hygienists, and the long-term relationships with the family dentist as the major reason they chose dentistry as a professional goal.

There is an abundance of career exploration materials available from many sources. Local dental schools, dental hygiene programs, state and local dental societies, state health organizations, the federal government, and the national organizations, the American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA), have readily available multi media resources. The Internet is fast becoming the first choice for exploring career options, and the above-mentioned groups have excellent websites and links to professional career information. The ADA is currently in the process of designing career packets for dentists as well as community-based programs. Non-members can access information on dental careers at their web site <http://www.ada.org/public/topics/teachers/index.html>

. They also have additional information for ADA members at: <http://www.ada.org/members/ada/insite/allied/allied-tc.html>

Additional information about dental hygiene can be obtained from the American Dental Hygienist Association web site at: <http://www.adha.org>.

Getting Involved

Dental professionals may choose how much they wish to be involved. Just the simple act of answering questions and providing an opportunity for interested young people to observe what goes on in a dental office during an average workday may have a significant impact on their future career



decisions. More ambitious plans may include organizing an explorer scout post or providing formal externship opportunities in cooperation with local high schools. Participation in career days at local grade, junior, and senior high schools is easy and enjoyable. Opportunities exist to participate as a speaker for community organizations and student groups. Prepared presentations may be available through local and state dental organizations for this purpose. If you are involved in dental health education, always take the chance to talk about what you do and how much you enjoy it.¹⁰⁻¹³

Some universities offer career exploration courses for pre-health majors in collaboration with dental schools. This provides opportunities to give lectures on the dental specialties, the future of dental care, specific types of dental procedures, etc. Often there are laboratory experiences and other hands-on activities. The direct cost of duplicating class materials, making laboratory models, and

paying student assistants was considered along with the indirect cost of using faculty "good will" for extra duty lectures and assignments. Nominal participation fees and voluntary contributions by local dentists covered direct expenditures. The indirect costs were significant because of the additional duty assignments performed by faculty and administrators. Usually, the same faculty participated in the series of career exploration courses/classes each year.

College pre-health advisors act as guidance counselors for students, and it is critical to provide these individuals with accurate information about the dental profession. Involvement of dental professionals with this counseling effort is encouraged.^{10,14}

Once someone decides to pursue a career in dentistry, there is a great opportunity for dental professionals to provide advice and guidance to nurture their success. Welcoming that individual to your office during their pre-dental program as well as during their dental education will truly make you a mentor. You may be the individual credited for providing the inspiration for "WHO" to complete a dental education. Who knows, this may be the person who someday buys your practice!¹⁵

Conclusions

Passive activities such as listening to scientific lectures and career presentations are not as pertinent to college students. Activities that require active participation, especially those requiring psychomotor skills, are the most successful in generating interest in a dental career.



Dental school administrators should continue to offer traditional forms of career programs and should offer these activities on the college feeder campuses or during the traditional vacation periods for students.

Formal mentoring programs including identification of members of the professional dental community should be a high priority. Mentoring appears to be

the least costly and most effective method of influencing career choices. Dental school administrators and professional associations should work together to develop these programs.

Limited financial resources of dental schools as well as increased teaching responsibilities of faculty should be considered when sponsoring career exploration activities. Utilizing the dental community resources and professional volunteers appear to be the most effective and least costly method of providing career exploration opportunities.

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Note: Links to citations open in a new browser window. To return to this page, just close the newly opened browser window by clicking on the X in the upper right hand corner of the window.

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Additional Resources

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