

Advancing Dental Hygiene Education: What does research tell us about the future of dental hygiene?

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In June of this year, Rutgers University held a workshop, inviting researchers for the project “Advancing Dental Education: Gies in the 21 Century.” The project consisted of two phases. In phase one, background papers focusing on the trends that will determine the future direction of dental education were written and published.^{1,2} Phase two consisted of the workshop where participants reviewed the published papers and made recommendations to address the issues and challenges in dental education over the next 25 years. A common theme voiced throughout the workshop was for dental education to be innovative and responsive to current and new workforce models in order to meet the demands of all populations seeking oral health care.

Minnesota has a reputation for developing and implementing innovative and creative ways to meet the demands of a prepared and competent dental workforce. In 1969 Minnesota was the first state to mandate continuing education requirements to maintain licensure.³ In 2001, Minnesota was the third state to expand access to care by allowing dental hygienists to provide dental hygiene care beyond the traditional, brick and mortar practice setting.⁴ Then in 2009, Minnesota was the first state to authorize the licensure of dental therapists and certification of advanced dental therapists.⁵

Minnesota has not been resting on its laurels. In 2012, dedicated educators and administrators designed an innovative approach to move baccalaureate education forward as the entry level for dental hygiene. More than forty years ago, the American Dental Hygienists’ Association advocated elevating the profession with the baccalaureate degree as the entry level for dental hygienists.⁶ The American Dental Education Association also published a brief on expanding dental hygiene pathways toward a bachelor degree.⁷ In reality, the majority of dental hygiene associate degree programs already approach a minimum of three years due to the required prerequisite courses necessary to meet the Commission on Dental Accreditation standards.

Associate degree graduates (AA/AAS) are seeking seamless pathways to a bachelor degree. However, most importantly, baccalaureate education is necessary for dental hygienists to meet the oral health care needs of all populations in the 21st century, especially for our vulnerable populations.⁷ In order to meet the needs of these populations, dental hygiene programs must prepare students to deliver care in settings beyond clinical private practice. Today’s oral health care professionals need higher-level order of problem-solving skills to be able to think critically while applying evidence to inform practice. Meeting this challenge as well as the other competencies such as health literacy, cultural sensitivity, community-based and/or interprofessional practice, by simply adding more content to an already crowded associate degree curriculum, is not possible.

The most recent innovative education pathway from Minnesota is the option of a dual admissions and enrollment program.⁸ In addition to Minnesota, Texas has developed a similar model of dual admissions at Texas Women’s University.⁹ How does dual enrollment work in Minnesota? Students admitted and enrolled in an AS/AAS dental hygiene program can begin to take upper division courses simultaneously to obtain a bachelor degree in dental hygiene (BSDH). This creative and seamless pathway allows a student to graduate with an AA/AAS degree from a community or technical college and a bachelor’s degree simultaneously or within a semester of completing the AA/AAS degree.

Students admitted to Normandale Community College’s associate dental hygiene program are enthusiastic about the opportunity to dual enroll at Metropolitan State University. Testimonials from students show that this curriculum model is achievable and prepares students for practicing in settings outside of private practice. Licensed dental hygienists seeking a BSDH as part of the degree completion program enroll in the core upper division dental hygiene courses with the associate students. An unexpected outcome of this program has been the mentorship and guidance provided by licensed dental hygienists.

The BSDH courses are delivered online and easily fit schedules. The coursework is individualized and paced to encourage student success. The bachelor curriculum content includes such topics as project management, leadership, business planning, team-based care, health equity, interprofessional collaboration and public health. Students find the BSDH degree a gateway to further study by offering a direct path to a master's degree in dental therapy, education, business public health, dental therapy and other education or career opportunities.

Higher education views this model as a win-win for students and the institutions. Community colleges can count the associate degree graduates in their completion totals and the university can count the baccalaureate degree graduates in their completion totals. Funding from Delta Dental of Minnesota Foundation along with a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) workforce grant has allowed for Normandale Community College to expand dual admissions and enrollment to include four other AA/AAS degree programs in dental hygiene in the state of Minnesota.

Constant communication and collaboration between institutions is the key to success when developing an innovative educational pathway such as the dual enrollment programs in Minnesota and Texas.¹⁰ Successful programs take commitment and dedication for the long haul and challenges will occur! Dental hygiene educators throughout Minnesota believe strongly that graduates need to be well prepared not only for traditional private practice settings but also for emerging practice settings in order to meet the needs of all populations.

For additional information and resources on dual admissions /enrollment as well as other innovative initiatives in Minnesota, access the Normandale Community College's signature website, "Minnesota 21st Century Dental Team at www.normandale.edu/mndentalteam.

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