



Michelle C. Arnett,  
DHSc, MS, RDH

## A Century of Science - A Future of Mentors

As we celebrate 100 years of the *Journal of Dental Hygiene*, it is important to reflect on our past mentors, the individuals who have helped pave a path forward for others and the steps that are required to meet the future needs of our profession. How will we support the academic literacy and scholarship that is needed to continue to build the body of knowledge that is the foundation of our profession? Our future is inextricably linked to our ability to cultivate and mentor the next generation of oral health care professionals so they are prepared to assume leadership roles in education, research and public policy.

### **Everyone Needs a Mentor**

My personal journey as a mentee in both dental hygiene education and research mirrors the broader evidence that mentors are the primary architects of a mentee's long-term career satisfaction and professional trajectory.<sup>1,2</sup> My early dental hygiene career was not guided by any mentors and I perceived a ceiling for career growth in clinical dental hygiene. Lacking a mentor to illuminate the diverse avenues within our profession, specifically within clinical practice, it ultimately led me to explore an advanced education for additional career pathways on my own. While I lacked a formal mentor during my first decade in private practice, the 'silver lining' of that void was that it ignited my personal quest to find professional fulfillment. This led me to the University of Michigan School of Dentistry to earn my Master of Science in Dental Hygiene. My time at Michigan was a pivotal period in my life when my newly found mentors taught,

sponsored, encouraged, and counseled me through the many stages of my career journey. Early in my academic career, my mentors supported and guided me through the transition from a clinician in private practice, to a graduate student and a dental hygiene educator. Just knowing how to navigate the academic system of bureaucracy, culture, and contracts alone can be daunting, as well as a determining factor for any entry level position in dental hygiene education. Through their role modeling and guidance, I learned the academic process and culture from my mentors, as well as how to become an effective educator in the clinic and classroom. As I stepped into these new roles and responsibilities, I quickly learned that this collegial guidance and formative feedback were the lifeblood of my professional growth. When my career progressed into research, additional mentors joined my team to guide, share their experience and expertise, and teach me how to develop research agendas to investigate topics impactful for oral health and our profession.

My mentors and I had shared responsibilities that benefited my personal growth and development as an educator and researcher. Their unique characteristics and qualities helped foster and maintain our relationship by demonstrating reciprocity, trust, and accountability. Essentially, they met me at my level of knowledge and skill, and provided support for me to reach levels I could not do alone. They also provided a safe space for me to ask elementary questions and to fail. They demonstrated humility and lacked arrogance. Lastly, and perhaps the most valuable trait was that

they upheld the accountability of our relationship for my goal-oriented growth and professional integrity. After a decade of dental hygiene education and research, I still lean on my diverse community of mentors to seek advice or guidance as my career continues to evolve.

### **Everyone Can Mentor**

Faculty mentors bridge the gap between basic training and professional mastery for both students and junior faculty. Furthermore, mentorship is a structured, leadership-oriented process essential for nurturing and cultivating the next cohort of oral health care professionals.<sup>1</sup> Research has highlighted the value of mentorship in dental hygiene education at both the undergraduate and graduate level in addition to faculty members,<sup>3-7</sup> yet a critical shortage of mentors exists. This raises the question of “why?” Is it a lack of structured strategic implementation, institutional support, faculty ‘buy-in,’ and/or formal and informal mentorship training? Perhaps all these factors are the reasons behind the “why.” To continue the advancement of our profession, there is an urgent need for structured mentorship for both students and faculty colleagues.<sup>3-7</sup>

Mentors have multifaceted roles that include taking an interest in developing and supporting the mentee’s career and professional goals.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of your professional rank in academia, we all can offer guidance from our lived experiences and expertise to those who may be following or are interested in a similar career path. Students are at the crossroads of multiple opportunities at the time of graduation from an undergraduate dental hygiene program. Providing mentorship as they begin their clinical career or seek advanced degrees to move into education or research, sets the foundation for cultivating the next generation of dental hygiene leaders.

The short report in this issue of the *Journal of Dental Hygiene* highlights the importance of academic literacy at the undergraduate level. Developing academic literacy serves as the primary gateway to future professional development and mentorship is the key to opening it. By fostering these critical skills

early through intentional, structured guidance, we can provide students with the trajectory needed for graduate-level scholarship and doctoral leadership for endless career advancements and opportunities.

How will you mentor the next generation of oral health professionals to reach heights they cannot achieve alone?

---

**Michelle C. Arnett, DHSc, MS, RDH** is an associate professor in the Department of Primary Dental Care, Division of Dental Hygiene at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, Minneapolis, MN, USA.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Rabeeah Z, Carreno JG, Kinney JS, Inglehart MR. Career motivation and satisfaction of dental hygiene students in associate versus bachelor degree programs: A national survey. *J Dent Educ.* 2022 Jun;86(6):649-60.
2. University of Michigan, Rackham Graduate School. How to mentor graduate students: A guide for faculty. Ann Arbor (MI): The Regents of the University of Michigan; 2024. 40 p.
3. Partido BB, Colón M. Motivations and challenges towards research activities among undergraduate dental hygiene students. *J Dent Hyg.* 2019 Oct;93(5):23-31.
4. Partido BB, Chartier EA, Heminger B. Experiences and attitudes of dental hygiene faculty regarding the mentorship of undergraduate student research. *J Dent Educ.* 2020 Nov;84(11):1202-9.
5. Bowen DM. History of dental hygiene research. *J Dent Hyg.* 2013;87(suppl 1):5-22.
6. Gopalan Y, Shum SB, Boud D. The professional learning of academic researchers through their career. *Stud High Educ.* 2025 May 19;1-18.
7. Reibel YG, Jiang Z, Arnett MC. Mentor like Minnesota: Outcomes of an undergraduate research mentorship program. *J Dent Hyg.* 2025 Apr;99(2):48-54.