

## CHAPTER 3

# DECIDING WHERE TO APPLY

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**S**electing the dental schools to which you want to apply is a very personal decision. Every applicant is looking for different characteristics in an educational experience. Your individual decision depends on many factors, such as career goals, personal interests, geographical preference, and family circumstances. For this reason, dental school rankings tend to be misleading. The education provided by U.S. and Canadian dental schools is of a high quality overall. As a more productive alternative, this chapter offers a framework to help you create your own list of dental schools tailored to your interests and needs. It covers fundamental issues that will help you decide what kind of educational experience you are looking for and begin to identify the schools most likely to offer it.

The general information in Chapter 2 provided a broad introduction to the dental school program. However, variations exist across dental schools that will be important when you make your decision about where to apply. If you have a commitment to providing community-based care, for example, you will likely prefer to attend a dental school that offers a public health focus and varied opportunities for gaining experience in community clinics. Similarly, if you are interested in ultimately focusing on oral health research, you will want to look for a dental school with a strong research focus and student research opportunities. Academic dental institutions also offer a range of curriculum options. Some schools offer innovative problem-based curricula and some organize their curricula along more integrative rather than discipline-based lines, while others follow a more traditional discipline-based, classroom instruction-followed-by-clinical training structure. You should therefore consider in what type of educational environment you will feel most comfortable and will best prepare you for the kind of career you will choose to follow.

The same approach holds true as you consider dental schools in different areas of the country. You may want to determine whether you are more comfortable in a particular geographical or physical location—a rural versus a big city setting, for example, or if you prefer to attend a school near where you grew up or one in a new area where you may want to remain after graduation. The composition of the student body also varies. Some schools have student bodies made up of individuals from all over the country (and some, even the world); some (primarily those affiliated with state universities) give preference to students from their home state; and some have partnership agreements with states that do not have dental schools, allowing students from those states to attend for the in-state tuition fee.

The key is to define your needs and preferences and then identify dental schools that correspond. To help you do that, here are some questions that can help you think through what you are looking for in a dental school:

## Dental School Rankings

Dental school applicants should be aware that there are proprietary publications available that purport to rank dental schools according to the quality of their programs.

The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) and the American Dental Association (ADA) advise applicants to view these rankings with caution. The bases for these rankings are questionable, and even those individuals most knowledgeable about dental education would admit to the difficulty of establishing criteria for, and achieving consensus on, such rankings. The accrediting organization for all U.S. dental schools is the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA). Applicants interested in the current accreditation status of any U.S. dental school should contact CODA at 800-621-8099. All schools have their relative strengths. A dental school ideally suited for one applicant might not be appropriate for another. ADEA and the ADA recommend that applicants investigate on their own the relative merits of the dental schools they wish to attend.

### *What is the focus of the dental school's training, and does it match my interests and needs?*

You might say, for example:

- I want to become a general practitioner, either in my own practice or in a group practice environment.
- I have a strong interest in scientific research regarding oral health.
- I am undecided about the type of dentistry I would like to practice, so I want to be in a school where I have a range of options from which to choose.
- My dream is to become a professor, so I'd like opportunities to prepare for an academic career while I'm in dental school. I want to prepare myself for eventual specialty training. I hope to obtain a combined degree.

### *What is the structure of the curriculum in terms of what is taught and when?*

You might say, for example:

- I would like to start getting hands-on clinical experience as soon as possible.
- I would like the opportunity to participate in research while in dental school.
- I am very interested in externships, especially the opportunity to participate in short-term service programs in other countries.
- I am devoted to helping the underserved. I want to make sure there are plenty of opportunities for community service.
- I plan to return to my home community as a general practitioner, so I want to focus on the training I need for that.
- I learn best in active learning situations. I want to find a curriculum that focuses on that style of education.

### *What academic resources are available?*

You might say, for example:

- I want to gain experience working with the most state-of-the-art technologies in dentistry.
- I am very interested in having easy access to modern clinical facilities and a large number of patients.
- I would like to get as much experience as possible working in a community setting.
- I would like to get as much experience as possible in a hospital setting.
- I want to have the opportunity to earn a Ph.D. as well as a dental degree.

### *What services are available to students?*

You might say, for example:

- I need to feel comfortable about seeking academic help if I need it.
- I would like to be active in student government.
- I want to attend a school that provides a supportive atmosphere for women and minorities.
- I want to attend a school in which the faculty and administration are sensitive to the stresses dental students experience.
- I want to be able to live on campus or to obtain inexpensive housing near campus.

### *Where is the school located?*

You might say, for example:

- My family situation requires me to attend dental school close to home.
- I prefer attending dental school in an urban setting.
- I need to attend a school where I can benefit from in-state tuition.
- I would like to attend a dental school in an area where hiking and outdoor recreation are easily available.

## STUDENT PROFILE



## ELLEN PAULISICK

FOURTH-YEAR DENTAL STUDENT  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND BALTIMORE COLLEGE OF  
DENTAL SURGERY  
HOMETOWN: MURRYSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

*Why dentistry?*

More importantly—why not! Dentistry provides me with a unique opportunity to take a vested interest in the overall well-being of each patient I treat. One of the most rewarding aspects of dentistry is being able to show patients how good oral health can improve systemic

health and self-esteem. I find that dentistry allows for a personal patient-provider relationship, therefore providing for a lifelong opportunity to educate and improve a patient's oral health.

*What are you doing now?*

I am completing an externship at the University of Maryland's satellite clinic in Cecil County, Maryland, where I treat many urgent care patients. I have enjoyed treating a population with different needs than the routine-care patients I see at school. From my experiences in the satellite clinic, I have come to understand even more about the disparity in access to dental care.

*Any advice for applicants?*

Stay true to yourself and keep an open mind! You may feel pressure from your family to make a specific decision or from seeing friends applying to certain schools. Remember, you know you best! Make a list of what you want to get out of your dental education, and refer back to this throughout the application process. Revisit your priorities pre- and post-interviews. Take notes during this process to help avoid confusion. Keep an open mind to new experiences and cities. Each school has something different to offer.

*What helped make the transition to dental school easier?*

I moved from the Washington, DC, area to Baltimore, Maryland. Though just up the interstate, moving to a new city presented its challenges. If you're moving to a new city, use social networking sites to your advantage. I

contacted current students for housing recommendations and met my classmates online before school started, which helped initiate a balance between a social life and good grades. Your classmates will become some of your best friends and truly part of your family.

*Would you advise shadowing?*

Shadowing is important for so many reasons, including discovering whether or not dentistry is right for you. It may be a red flag if spending a day in a dentist's office is like pulling teeth (pun intended). While shadowing, I was able to practice my manual dexterity when several dentists let me work on projects such as waxing teeth. Since dentistry is a social profession, observing dentists and how they interact with their patients is invaluable.

*What is your advice on financial aid?*

Be financially responsible and manage the cost of tuition with available funds. Scholarships, work-study programs, and fellowships are great ways to cut down tuition costs. Through the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, I received a stipend supporting community service that allowed me to continue a project to help homeless women in Baltimore City obtain access to and funds for dental care. It's a great example of how you can do something you love and receive aid for school expenses. The more responsible you are now, the less you have to pay back down the line.

*What is your relationship status?*

I am in a great relationship that helps keep me grounded despite the stress of dental school.

Your answers to all these questions—and others that you will think of as well—should help you conduct an initial analysis of the information on individual schools in Part II of this book. You can then expand your research by asking for more information directly from each school that you consider a prospect.

To get you started, the tables in this chapter provide an at-a-glance, cumulative comparison of a number of aspects of the individual dental schools.

**Table 3-1** presents the number of applicants and enrollees at each school, broken down by gender, race, and ethnicity.

**Table 3-2** shows the number of applicants interviewed or accepted and enrollees at each school, broken down by in-state/in-province and out-of-state/out-of-province categories.

**Table 3-3** summarizes specific admissions requirements for each school.

**Table 3-4** provides characteristics of the entering class of each school.

**Table 3-5** shows the geographic break down of each school's entering class.

**Table 3-6** provides information on the combined degree programs at each school.

**Table 3-7** offers a national perspective on admissions trends.

The information in the tables is presented alphabetically by state, territory, and province.

For more information and detailed admissions requirements for each school, consult the individual school profiles in Part II of this book. **As you determine where you plan to send applications, you should contact those dental schools directly for the most complete information about admission requirements. The telephone numbers, addresses, and websites of each school are included in the profiles.**