



A Monthly Newsletter from ADEA Executive Director Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H.

In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, recounts the experiences of underrepresented minority and low-income students in summer academic enrichment programs and in dental school.



SMDEP gives students a vision of what's possible for their futures and an understanding that dentists make a difference in peoples' lives.

Can a Girl From the Caribbean Find Happiness in Nebraska? Tales from the AAMC/ADEA Summer Medical and Dental Education Program

Shari Brewer was a precocious 14-year-old when she convinced her parents to let her leave their home on the Caribbean island of Dominica to pursue an education in the United States. Her older sister, a scholarship student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, had invited her to come north for her junior and senior years of high school. They had difficulty talking their mother into the unorthodox arrangement, but eventually Shari and her sister prevailed.

"When I first came to Nebraska in May," Shari reminisces, "I thought it was freezing. Little did I know!"

The cold weather was just the first of several culture shocks, followed by the food, which she diplomatically describes as "totally different." She sounds almost like a native Nebraskan if you speak to her today, but she admits this was not always the case. Her accent drew unwanted attention in high school, so she made a point of losing it along the way.

Shari was among the first dental scholars to take part in the [Summer Medical and Dental Education Program](#) (SMDEP), directed by ADEA and the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#). The program gives students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds with an interest in health careers six weeks of intensive academic enrichment, clinical experiences, and advice on financial and career planning, all to assist them in gaining admission to dental or medical school. Launched in 2005 with generous funding from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), SMDEP makes a sizable contribution to ADEA's efforts to increase the dental school enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds and ultimately enhance diversity within the health professions.

Shari's interest in dentistry stems from her own history of dental problems, including a supernumerary tooth. When an allergy to cats derailed her childhood dream of becoming a veterinarian, her dentist suggested that she consider his field. It turned out to be a natural fit. "I started shadowing him, and I discovered that I love working with people and working with my hands," she says.

Four years later, while a student at Nebraska's Doane College, Shari became acquainted with Dr. Curtis Kuster, Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs at the [University of Nebraska Medical Center \(UNMC\) College of Dentistry](#) in Lincoln, which is one of nine SMDEP dental sites. A frequent visitor to Doane's campus, Curt easily spotted the would-be dentist and recommended that she apply to SMDEP at UNMC.

"Curt really rolls out the red carpet and makes the scholars feel welcome," says Dr. John Reinhardt, Dean at UNMC's College of Dentistry, and it pays off for the school in a more diverse student body. Thirteen of the 20 students in the school's first SMDEP class applied to dental school at UNMC, and the seven who were accepted matriculated. The following year, nearly three-quarters of Nebraska's SMDEP alums submitted applications. Nine were accepted, and eight are now students at UNMC. Most impressive of all, of the five students who made the first semester Dean's List in 2009, the top three were SMDEP alums.

"I was a little nervous that it would be tough to recruit students to come live in Nebraska in the summer," John confided when we spoke, pointing out that many students, especially those from the country's urban areas, think of Nebraska as bland and homogenous. He was concerned they might not know how dynamic UNMC is or what a pleasant quality of life Omaha and Lincoln have to offer. Would potential applicants want to come to Nebraska?

The answer turned out to be a resounding "yes." SMDEP scholars feel so comfortable, in fact, that many do not want to leave at the conclusion of the program—a fact underscored by the high percentage of alums who do all they can to return to UNMC as dental students. I asked Curt Kuster for his thoughts on why UNMC has such a high "capture" rate.

"Because there are so few scholars in the dental program [typically 20 on each SMDEP campus], it is a tight-knit group," Curt told me. He prizes the camaraderie that develops among the dental students. In fact, the connection is so strong that it has drawn four students from the medical side of the program over to dentistry.

One of these is Erin Bazata, a SMDEP alumna from Randolph, Nebraska, a town of about 1,000 people. Erin started SMDEP as a medical scholar but, she says, "I wasn't sold on medicine. About halfway through the program I had a chance to spend a day at the dental school, and I absolutely loved it. I felt happy there. It just felt right."

Mondays through Thursdays, SMDEP medical and dental scholars study together on UNMC's Omaha campus, but Erin arranged to start spending Fridays in Lincoln with the dental cohort. When the group placed restorations in a mannequin the following week, she knew she had found her vocation. "I was glad we were wearing face masks, because I had such a big smile. I didn't want to look like a goofball."

When it came time to apply to dental school, Nebraska was understandably Erin's first choice. Her freshman year is going well, and after graduation she's leaning toward returning to practice in a rural Nebraska community. That's good news, for while Nebraska's dentist-to-population ratio is above the national average, dentists are poorly distributed. State records indicate that general dentists are in short supply in 53 of its rural counties.

SMDEP takes place on 12 campuses across the nation, and nine of these have joint medical and dental programs. To see how the SMDEP experience compares on other campuses, I called Dr. Cecile Feldman, Dean of the [University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey](#) (UMDNJ). She is pleased with what SMDEP is doing for individual students, and she values its service to a larger goal.

"I believe very strongly in having a dental workforce that represents the population," she told me. "SMDEP introduces underrepresented minorities to opportunities in dentistry and gives them a vision of what's possible for their futures. When the students have an opportunity to work with dental materials and observe dentists working in the clinic, they quickly gain an understanding that dentists really do make a difference in peoples' lives. They see that dentistry does not focus on whitening or fixing teeth; rather, it is about impacting patients' health and quality of life."

Cecil put me in touch with Dr. Rosa Chaviano-Moran, Acting Director of Admissions for the predoctoral program and Program Director for the dental portion of UMDNJ's SMDEP program. Rosa wears many hats, but this last is one of her favorites.

"For me, it's personal," Rosa told me. "I feel fortunate to have been given an opportunity to become a dentist, and I want to give that opportunity to my scholars."

Over the past four years, she has thrown herself into refining the UMDNJ program. Today it includes three sessions in the dental clinic, where scholars engage in preclinical exercises like learning to use hand pieces and working with dental restorative materials such as amalgam and composites. The program also gives scholars exposure to dental specialties, with a number of accomplished dentists volunteering their time to speak.

As it happens, the New York City medical examiner is a graduate of UMDNJ's Dental School. He gives a powerful presentation to SMDEP scholars on physical abuse and the use of dental records in identifying crime and disaster victims, such as those he identified following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Other specialists deliver lectures on emerging issues in health care such as implant dentistry, and professors from UMDNJ's School of Health Related Professions also make presentations. This allows the scholars to see what other health professions are out there, in case they discover that dentistry is not for them.

To date four SMDEP scholars have matriculated at UMDNJ, and four more have been accepted so far this year. One of the first to enroll was Jazmin Floyd, currently a sophomore at UMDNJ. While an undergraduate at Montclair State University, Jazmin heard Rosa speak at a program designed to prepare minority students for the

health professions. "When we found out we were both from Elizabeth (New Jersey)," Jazmin told me, "we clicked right then and there. We stayed in touch, and when I went to her for advice, she recommended SMDEP."

Asked about the impact the program had on her studies, Jazmin recalls that the following semester at Montclair she was much better prepared for organic chemistry than her classmates, and she praises the program for showing her what she needed to do to boost her GPA and become a competitive dental school applicant. But if you ask her what really stands out, she points to the relationships she formed while immersed in the educationally supportive and enriching culture that characterizes SMDEP.

"I got to meet other students who are interested in the health professions. We're still in touch, and I think we'll be lifetime friends," Jazmin told me. "We also got to interact with the UMDNJ administrators. They got to know me, and those one-on-one encounters taught me what I needed to do to be the best candidate."

I heard echoes of her sentiments when I spoke with John Reinhardt about Nebraska's SMDEP scholars. "What I like most are the relationships the students develop with us and with each other," he told me.

SMDEP alumna Erin Bazata concurs, citing the ease with which she was able to communicate with Curt Kuster at Nebraska. "Dr. Kuster is the kind of person who will remember your name, where you went to school." That was important to Erin, who describes herself as shy.

Likewise, Shari expresses gratitude that Dr. Kuster connected her with SMDEP. She feels the program was "a life saver." Without it, she fears that dental schools would not have taken her seriously because of her relative youth.

In all truth, I'm not surprised that UNMC and UMDNJ, schools that have welcomed SMDEP, also welcome its graduates, but I was curious to find out what kind of reception they receive on other campuses. With this in mind, I called Elizabeth Perez, a sophomore at the [University of North Carolina \(UNC\) School of Dentistry](#). A native of Mexico who grew up in Florida, Elizabeth was the first person in her family to attend college.

She calls her summer as an SMDEP scholar at [Columbia University](#) "the best time I ever had in my life." She credits the program with boosting her self-confidence and making her aware that she could spread her wings beyond Florida. She had the option of returning to Columbia for dental school, but ultimately opted for UNC. "I wanted to stay in a southern climate," she told me. "Plus UNC gave me a scholarship so it was kind of a no-brainer."

Elizabeth has been warmly received in North Carolina, and she is very happy with her choice. She praises the professors, the quality of the laboratory facilities, and the fact that UNC dental students see patients during the first year. She is also grateful that the state is subsidizing her education. She plans to remain in North Carolina at least five years after graduation, ideally working in a community where she can put her Spanish language skills to use. "Then I'll see where opportunity takes me," she says.

And what has become of our girl from the Caribbean? The opportunities to observe oral surgical procedures and work with dental simulation units during SMDEP confirmed Shari's interest in pursuing a career in dentistry. She is currently in her second year at UNMC, and now that the stress of the first year and board exams are behind her, she is looking forward to becoming more active in what you might call the political arena. During the program, she served as Vice President of the SMDEP student body. She would like to run for office again, and in the immediate future she is hoping to organize a mission to Dominica with her fellow students.

"We have universal health care in Dominica," Shari told me, "but it doesn't include routine dental care, just extractions when the pain gets too bad. We have too many sweet fruits," she adds with a laugh.

Now that you've had a chance to "meet" some of the SMDEP scholars who have started dental school, I hope you'll agree that they are doing well. Over the past four years, we have learned what we need to do to help these students academically, and our efforts are paying off, both for individual students and for the schools involved. Dental school admissions committees at all of our member institutions owe it to themselves to look seriously at these students.

The value of an academic intervention such as SMDEP is also being validated by the work of Josh Aronson, Associate Professor of Applied Psychology at New York University. His research shows that if you take two identical groups of students and tell them how you anticipate they will perform, those who receive positive messages produce better results. In other words, it is not just the specific things we do to help students improve their academic performance that make a difference. It is also the act of admitting them to the club of those who can envision a rewarding future in the health professions. SMDEP is doing just that by immersing these students in an

academic environment that helps them understand the culture of medical and dental school and develop confidence in their abilities to function in this previously foreign milieu.

The ability of Shari, Erin, Jazmin, and Elizabeth to thrive in the competitive atmosphere that exists in the highly respected dental schools they attend speaks volumes about the value of programs like SMDEP. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation agrees. It recently announced its intention to fund the program for two more years at all of its 12 current sites.



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