

A Monthly Newsletter from Executive Director Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H. The views and opinions expressed in this letter are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the American Dental Education Association.

In this month's letter, ADEA Executive Director Dr. Rick Valachovic celebrates a milestone in the history of a program that now involves ADEA and is contributing to the diversity of our dental schools.

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Diversifying the Dentist Workforce, One Cohort at a Time

Rural Nebraskans now have one more dentist they can rely on, and next year, underserved urban New Jersey residents may be able to say the same. Where did these new practitioners come from? Why have they chosen to practice where they have? Part of the credit goes to the [Summer Medical and Dental Education Program](#) (SMDEP), which celebrated a landmark event last month: the graduation from dental school of the first cohort of SMDEP dental scholars.

In case you're not familiar with the program, SMDEP is a free six-week academic enrichment program that helps qualified undergraduate students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds compete successfully for medical and dental school admission. (For more details, see ["Today's Student's—Tomorrow's Colleagues"](#) in the August 2007 edition of *Charting Progress*.) The program, formerly known as the Minority Medical Education Program (MMEP), was initiated and funded by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) (RWJF) in 1987 to serve premedical students from underrepresented minority groups. Predental students were welcomed into the program as dental scholars on a pilot basis in 2005. ADEA and the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) (AAMC) now lead the program, with nine dental schools among the 12 program sites that host SMDEP scholars. I serve as a director of the SMDEP along with Dr. Marc Nivet at AAMC. Dr. W. David (Dave) Brunson here at ADEA serves as the dental deputy director.

Some of you may remember Ms. Jazmin Floyd [from a previous Charting Progress](#). I spoke to the Elizabeth, New Jersey, native two years ago when she was studying at the [University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey](#) (UMDNJ). Dr. Floyd, who graduated on May 23, will be entering a general practice residency program at Mountainside Hospital in Montclair, New Jersey, this July. She is not certain where she will go from there, but she knows this much: "I want to remain in an urban community, and I want to give back."

Dr. Floyd's resolution is good to hear. One of the reasons SMDEP is helping underrepresented and disadvantaged students gain entry to medical and dental schools is to increase their representation in the practice community and thereby improve access to care.

As I write, we are still tallying the graduates, but I can tell you that 309 SMDEP scholars from the 2006-10 summer cohorts have enrolled in 53 different dental schools, and more than 1,000 have participated in the program as dental scholars. Many of these are still completing their college degrees.

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I wanted to hear RWJF's perspective on this recent milestone in SMDEP's history, so I called Foundation Program Associate Ms. Andrea Daitz, who oversees SMDEP. She told me that from RWJF's point of view, the program is still evolving.

"The challenge is always, 'How do we reach the students we want to reach, and how do we define those students?'" Andrea told me. "We want to make sure that people from all backgrounds have an opportunity to bring a range of perspectives to health care so they really reflect the diversity of our nation and benefit all Americans down the road."

The program's evolution reflects the Foundation's efforts to address this challenge. MMEP's initial focus on minority students was broadened in 2003 to include low-income students and those from rural areas, and its name was changed to Summer Medical Education Program (SMEP). These new admission criteria, and the inclusion of dental scholars two years later, opened the door for students like Mr. Andrew Benson, who is now Dr. Benson, a recent graduate of the [University of Nebraska Medical Center](#) (UNMC) and a 2006 UNMC SMDEP program participant.

Dr. Benson grew up on a farm in central Nebraska. He was one of 63 seniors at his small public high school. He entered [Wayne State College](#) (WSC) knowing that he wanted to pursue dentistry and heard about SMDEP from his chemistry teacher. When we recently spoke, he called the program "an eye-opener." It encouraged him to make a firm commitment to dentistry while allowing him to see his strengths and weaknesses in relation to those of his peers.

Unlike many recent graduates who tend to cluster in and around big cities, Dr. Benson has chosen a rural practice that will allow him to meet his personal goals while helping a community that needs dental services.

"I wanted to be close to home so I could help farm," Dr. Benson explained. "I like small-town life and the strong community feeling."

This month he began work for a multisite dental firm and is splitting his time between the small city of Grand Island and an underserved town with a population of 1,000.

In addition to its contributions to creating a more diverse dental and medical workforce, SMDEP also has benefits for the educational institutions that host it and admit the program's alumni.

"The students bring a richness to the class, in terms of where they come from geographically and the demographic distribution," assesses Ms. Corky Cacas, who is the Director of Admissions for the [University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine](#) (Penn Dental Medicine). "We know that anyone going through the program is really prepared and really motivated to enter the profession."

By way of example, she cites some SMDEP alumni who received merit scholarships at Penn Dental and one who was recently accepted into a dual-degree program. He will earn a degree in bioengineering along with his D.M.D. degree.

Dr. Patricia E. (Patti) Meehan, Assistant Dean for Admissions and Recruitment at the [University of Maryland School of Dentistry](#), concurs with Corky Cacas' assessment. "We view participation in an academic enrichment program like SMDEP as a positive element of an admissions profile," she told me. "Of our three graduating SMDEP seniors, all were very solid contributors academically, and two received awards in recognition of their outstanding community service and leadership during their four years here at Maryland."

When SMDEP began, there was skepticism on some campuses that a six-week summer program would be enough to help educationally disadvantaged students gain admission to dental school, let alone succeed if they were admitted. With 53 of our schools having admitted former SMDEP scholars, it appears those fears are being laid to rest.

Dr. Ernestine S. (Ernie) Lacy, Director of the Office of Student Development at [Baylor College of Dentistry](#) (Baylor) will be happy to see the end of that skepticism. Baylor has admitted many SMDEP alumni, not surprisingly since Ernie helped initiate the school's eight-week, formal, in-depth pre-dental summer enrichment program for college students in 1996. Today, Baylor hosts a number of pipeline initiatives (see

the [February 2010 edition of the ADEA CCI Liaison Ledger](#)), thanks largely to Ernie's efforts and support throughout the Baylor ranks. She has seen dozens of students who were once considered educationally disadvantaged pass through Baylor's doors and walk across the stage at graduation time.

"These students can come in on a level playing field and perform at the level of our other students," she insists. "The programs are effective. They work!"

Clearly, SMDEP is achieving its primary mission of preparing underrepresented students for admission to—and success in—dental school, but the program has ancillary benefits as well. For starters, "Some of the medical and dental schools weren't working together before," Andrea Daitz (at RWJF) observes. "The fact that many now are has strengthened relationships among the schools within participating institutions."

Of course, the ultimate test of SMDEP's dental alumni has yet to come. Will their entrance into dental school ultimately position more oral health professionals in underserved communities? For now, SMDEP's sponsors are betting that it will. The Foundation is continuing its commitment for the long run, and AAMC and ADEA—along with SMDEP sites—are committed to refining the program's delivery.

Each December, SMDEP sites come together to share best practices. Most recently, the sites have been asked to focus more on regional recruitment, to connect with other pipeline initiatives that reach students in the precollege years, and to pilot a commuter component. This spring, the SMDEP Alumni National Advisory Board was formed to better connect former scholars to each other and to opportunities in keeping with the program's mission.

"We want to communicate to the students that we expect them to stay in touch," says Andrea, "and that we see them as leaders in their respective fields—whether in practice, in research, or in policy. They are the future of health care, and we really do expect incredible things from them in all areas."

It's wonderful to be associated with a program and an organization that both take the long view. Those of us in the health professions know all too well that the problems of workforce diversity and access to care are multifaceted and cannot be solved overnight. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year—appreciates this fact as well. The Foundation—which invests methodically over the course of years, constantly evaluating and refining its programs—achieves some remarkable results.

The transformation of these first SMDEP dental scholars into dental school graduates marks another milestone in the Foundation's deliberate effort to advance the nation's health. Happy 40th, RWJF, and congratulations, SMDEP dental scholar graduates! I, for one, hope you will remain connected to one another and continue to contribute to a more diverse workforce and improved access to care.



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