



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, highlights a program that provides intensive preparation for dental school to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.*



### **Today's Students—Tomorrow's Colleagues**

As we anticipate the start of a new academic year, I feel more optimistic than ever about the future. Applications to dental schools have absolutely skyrocketed over the last five years, and the pool of applicants is slowly becoming more diverse. Applications to allied dental programs and advanced education programs have increased as well, but the diversity of applicants in these areas has grown more slowly.

This fact that the diversity of the dental school applicant pool has increased bodes well for communities that have been underserved with limited access to dental care. Over the next decade, a growing cohort of young people who are eager to practice dentistry in the same underserved communities where they grew up will be graduating from our schools. It won't be easy for many of them. They'll need help along the way, but an exciting new program is giving them a solid foundation to build on.

A little more than two years ago ADEA and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) created the Summer Medical and Dental Education Program (SMDEP). In a nutshell, the program:

- *Identifies students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have academic potential, an interest in health care, and a desire to serve their own communities*
- *Gives them six weeks of intensive academic enrichment, clinical experiences, learning skills development, and career planning*
- *Sends them back to their institutions with the confidence and skills they need to improve their academic performance and gain admission to dental or medical school*

What defines these SMDEP students? They work hard, but their grades may not be stellar and their test scores often fall short. They attended high schools that likely offered few advanced courses. Many of their parents didn't go to college, yet they themselves have chosen to pursue further study. They're attracted to a future in health care, but they're not sure how to navigate the educational system. And unlike many of the young people who are finishing dental and medical school today, they are willing to practice medicine and dentistry in the areas that need them most.

Launched in 2005 with generous funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), SMDEP is making a sizable contribution to ADEA's efforts to increase minority enrollment in dental schools and enhance diversity within the profession. Nearly 2,000 students, about a quarter of them pre-dental, took part in SMDEP in its first two years.

While earlier summer preparatory programs concentrated primarily on exposing students to a clinical practice environment or preparing juniors, seniors, and postbaccalaureate students for the MCAT or DAT, SMDEP emphasizes academic enrichment. It also serves younger students, giving

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freshmen and sophomores the critical academic and personal skills they will need throughout their educational journey.

SMDEP student Ms. Dele Ajagbe entered the University of Michigan with an interest in dentistry and a passion for public health, but her first year of college came as a shock. She bluntly admits, "I didn't have the study skills." At Columbia University this summer she has gained a renewed faith in her ability to pursue a career in dentistry. "There's always the question of what are you going to do with your life, but then you wonder, am I capable of doing it? The program has given me a lot of clarity about where I'm going and confidence that I can do the work."

Twelve of the nation's top universities currently offer [SMDEP programs](#). These vary from campus to campus, but all SMDEP programs include core courses in biology, physics, organic chemistry, and calculus or precalculus. They also teach students study skills and the written and oral communication skills they will need to do well in school and as professionals.

Ms. Mary Joshua, principal investigator for the University of Louisville SMDEP, says, "We want students to leave with a realistic view of the rigors of medical and dental education." Her program integrates the basic sciences in an exploration of fundamental biomedical topics such as energy metabolism and the cardiovascular system. Students are then challenged to apply the knowledge they obtain in the classroom to clinical cases in both medicine and dentistry. They also hear from practicing clinicians who further cement the connections between science education and clinical practice.

With the recent explosion in dental school applications, students with weak GPAs or test scores have an especially difficult time gaining admission to dental school. Students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds traditionally do not have the higher academic metrics (one example is the DAT score) needed for serious consideration, but preparatory programs such as SMDEP can start to remedy this situation.

Dr. David Brunson, Associate Director of the ADEA Center for Equity and Diversity, codirects SMDEP. He points out that most of the program's students face additional obstacles including a lack of role models or good advising. "They don't know how to go about the process. They don't know how to interview, they don't know how to apply, they don't know what it is to be a professional, and this program exposes them to all of that."

Financial planning workshops help SMDEP students figure out how they will combine school with work and handle loan repayments. All participants leave SMDEP with an academic and career development plan and most importantly, the confidence and skills they need to become competitive applicants to dental school.

Last year's SMDEP graduates report that their grades are going up and that the program has helped them develop a vision for the future. Those of us at ADEA who visited the program sites this summer could feel the excitement among the current students. Almost 100% of them said they will tell others to apply and attend.

While we have no doubt that the program is already making a difference, we intend to quantify its impact by tracking our students over time. Our efforts will be put to the test over the next few years as the first cohorts begin applying to dental schools. Graduates of SMDEP's forerunner summer program, SMEP (the Summer Medical Education Program, which was administered by AAMC), saw their chances for admission to medical school increase by 50%. We anticipate similar results and hope to see even larger increases.

These hopes find confirmation in Dele Ajagbe's reflections. "I didn't expect the program to be so profound for me." She appreciated the opportunity to meet students from all over the country, including other minority students enrolled at predominantly white institutions, and she praised her interactions with students and faculty at Columbia's dental and medical schools. "I've received so much more support here," she says. "It feels great to know that these will be my colleagues down the road."

By raising students' awareness of what they need to succeed at a professional level, SMDEP implants the seeds of confidence that trigger

academic growth. We hope that SMDEP also demonstrates to medical and dental school admissions officers that educationally disadvantaged students can develop the skills necessary for academic success. If so, the future looks bright for these young people, their communities, and our profession. No wonder I'm optimistic.



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