PERCEPTIONS OF DENTAL THERAPY

REPORT

Dental Hygiene and Dental Assisting Students in Michigan

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2018, the Michigan legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 541, approving dental therapists as the newest members of the oral health care workforce. This legislative policy was enacted as a strategy to increase access to dental services and to meet the needs of underserved populations in Michigan. Since the bill passed, administrative rules have been promulgated and, as of April 2021, dental therapists have had the ability to practice in the state. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) has taken the necessary steps to allow licensed dental therapists to enroll in Michigan Medicaid and be reimbursed for services. However, there are currently no dental therapists practicing in the state of Michigan and there are no Michigan-based colleges or universities that offer a dental therapy education program for prospective students.

A survey of dental hygiene and dental assisting students was completed as part of a larger study to gain a better understanding of the current context surrounding dental therapy. Specifically, this survey was designed to identify students' perceptions and attitudes toward dental therapy and to identify potential factors that may influence their pursuit of a career in dental therapy. The survey was targeted to students actively enrolled in an accredited dental hygiene or dental assisting program in Michigan.

A total of 93 dental hygiene or dental assisting student completed the survey.

RESPONDENTS

Who Responded To The Survey?



Of the 93 respondents, 74% were pursuing an associate degree in dental hygiene, 20% were pursuing a bachelor degree in dental hygiene, 3% were pursuing non-degree dental assisting training, and 2% were pursuing an associate degree in dental assisting. Most respondents (95%) were in the first or second year of their program.



After graduation, 60% of respondents indicated interest in working in a group private practice and 58% indicated interest in working in a solo private practice. Only 15% of respondents indicated an interest in working in a community health setting, such as a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), community health center, or Tribal health center.



The majority of respondents (74%) reported that they anticipated some debt after graduation – 63% expect to have less than \$50,000 in debt; 11% anticipate a debt of \$50,000 or more.



Nearly all respondents (94%) were female. Over three-quarters (80%) were White or Caucasian, 8% were Black or African American, 6% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 4% were Hispanic, and 2% were American Indian or Alaska Native.



Instructors, professional associations, and peer-reviewed journals were information sources that respondents reported they would use to learn more about dental therapy.

Detailed figures are presented on pages 4-7.

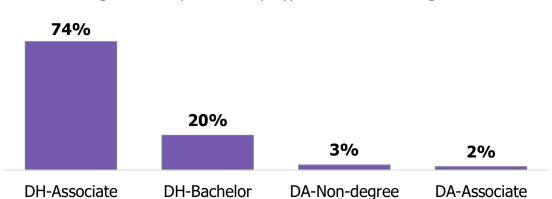


Figure 1. Respondents by Type of Education Program

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by current educational program. DH = dental hygiene; DA = dental assisting.

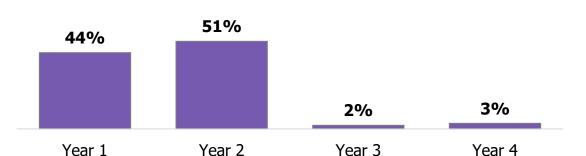


Figure 2. Respondents by Years of Enrollment in Education Program

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by years of enrollment in current education program.

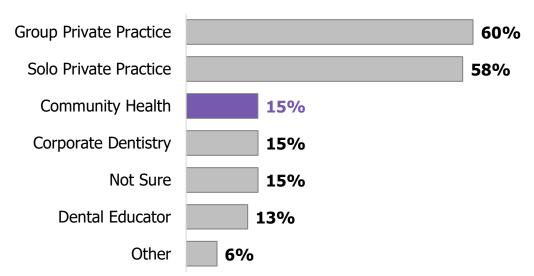


Figure 3. Respondents by Career Plans After Graduation

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by career plans after graduation. Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one practice setting.

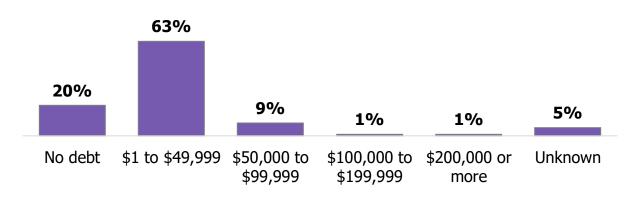


Figure 4. Anticipated Debt Amount Upon Graduation

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by anticipated debt after graduation. Approximately 5% of respondents did not respond to this question (unknown).

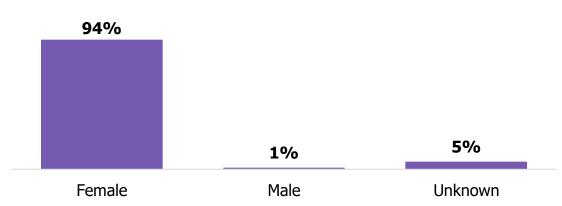


Figure 6. Gender Reported by Respondents

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by gender. Approximately 5% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown).

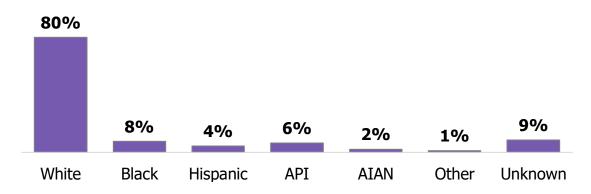


Figure 7. Race and Ethnicity Reported by Respondents

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by race and ethnicity. API = Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native Hawaiian; AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; Other races and ethnicities include respondents who identified as Iraqi. Approximately 9% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one race or ethnicity.

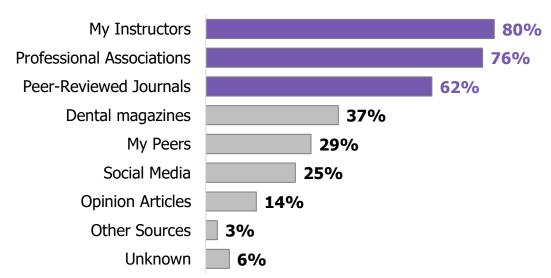


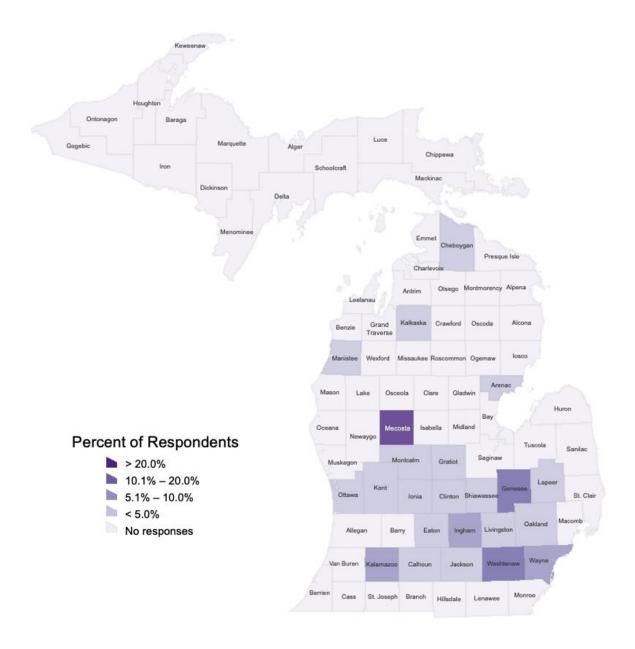
Figure 8. Preferred Information Source to Learn About Dental Therapy

The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by the preferred information source to learn more about dental therapy. Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one information source.



"I am a current dental hygienist pursuing a bachelors, and I have experienced the huge deficit of oral healthcare providers, especially since COVID. There is an overwhelming need for providers that can treat the underserved populations of our communities. I have been waiting and waiting for an institution to open up a program for dental therapy in Michigan so I can be one of the first to help satisfy this need!" – Third Year Dental Hygiene Student

Where Do Respondents Currently Attend School?



Respondents were asked in which area of Michigan they currently attend school. Approximately 2% of respondents did not provide a response to this question. Of the remaining 91 respondents, 27% attended school in Mecosta County, 12% in Genesee County, 11% in Washtenaw County, 8% in Ingham County, 7% in Kalamazoo County, and 7% in Wayne County.

ATTITUDES

What Are Respondents' Attitudes Towards Dental Therapy?

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with seven statements related to dental therapy.



Nearly all respondents agreed that dental practitioners have a responsibility to provide care to underserved populations and that significant disparities exist for many residents due to poor access to care.



Most respondents (78%) agreed that dental therapists will improve access to care in underserved areas.



Most respondents (86%) agreed that licensed dental therapists will provide high quality care within their allowed scope.



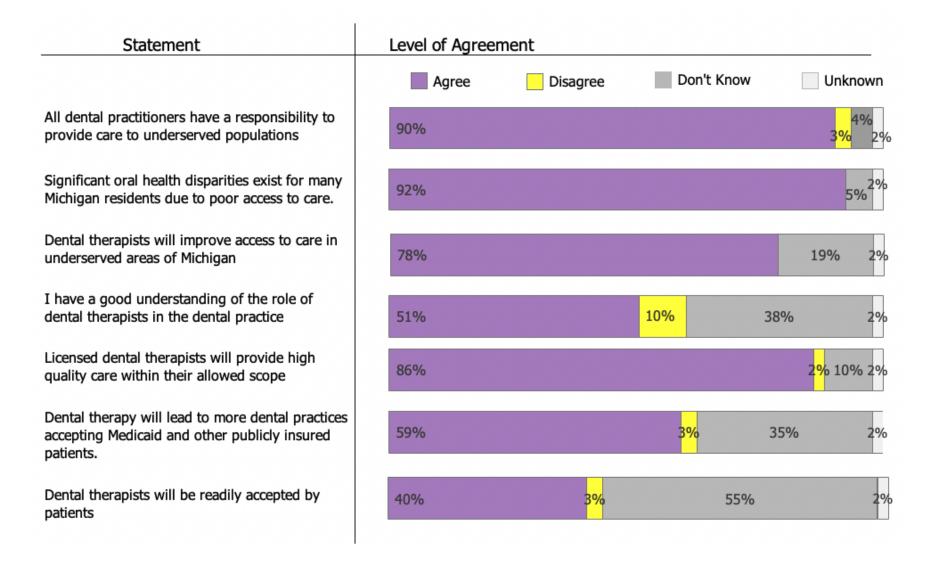
About half of respondents (51%) agreed that they had a good understanding of the role of dental therapists in the dental practice; 10% of respondents did not agree that they had a good understanding and 38% did not know.



More than half (59%) of respondents agree that dental therapy will lead to more practices accepting Medicaid insurance and 40% of respondents agreed that dental therapists will be readily accepted by patients.

Detailed figures are presented on page 10.

Figure 9. Respondents' Agreement with Statements Related to Dental Therapy



CAREER INTEREST

What Are Respondents' Interests in a Career in Dental Therapy?

Respondents were asked about their current level of interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy.



Over half of respondents expressed interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy. Of the 93 respondents, 23 respondents (25%) expressed a lot of interest and 34 respondents (37%) expressed some interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy; 17 respondents (18%) reported no interest at all, 16 respondents (17%) indicated that they were not sure, and 3 respondents (3%) did not provide an answer to the question.



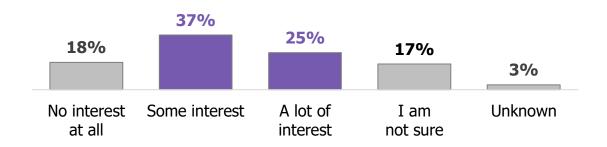
"Michigan needs to add programs for this profession and make it attainable for hygienists to work and attend. Most of us would still have to work to pay bills and provide for our family." – Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

"I'm very interested in a career as a dental therapist and am really excited about the possibility of Michigan getting a program." —
Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

"I think that dental therapy should definitely be discussed more within the dental field so people have a better understanding of what it is." – First Year Dental Hygiene Student

A detailed figure is presented on page 12.

Figure 10. Respondents' Interest in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by their level of interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy. Approximately 3% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown).

What are the Characteristics of Respondents Interested in a Dental Therapy Career?

A separate analysis of demographic characteristics was conducted among the 57 respondents who expressed a lot or some interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy.



Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) were pursuing an associate degree in dental hygiene, 25% were pursuing a bachelor degree in dental hygiene, 2% were pursuing non-degree dental assisting training, and 2% were pursuing an associate degree in dental assisting.



After graduation, 58% of respondents planned to work in a solo private practice and 56% planned to work in a group private practice; 23% of respondents reported interest in working in a community health setting, like a FQHC, community health center, or Tribal health center.



The majority of respondents (79%) reported that they anticipated some debt after graduation – 67% expect to have less than \$50,000 in debt; 12% anticipate a debt of \$50,000 or more.



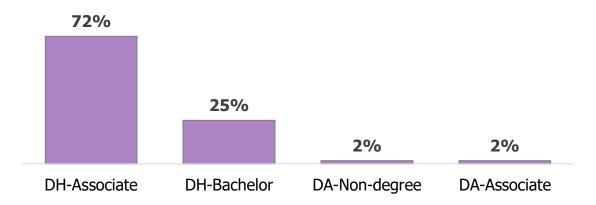
Most respondents (96%) were female. Over three-quarters (82%) were White or Caucasian, 11% were Black or African American, 7% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% were Hispanic, and 4% were American Indian or Alaska Native.



Instructors, professional associations, and peer-reviewed journals were information sources that respondents reported they would use to learn more about dental therapy.

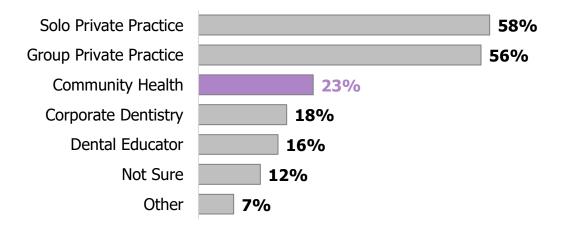
Detailed figures are presented on pages 14-16.

Figure 11. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Education Program



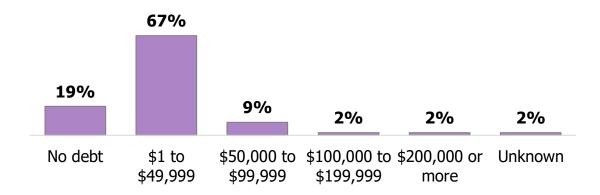
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by education program. DH = dental hygiene; DA = dental assisting.

Figure 12. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Career Plans After Graduation



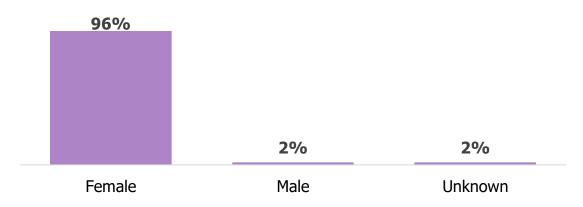
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by career plans after graduation. Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one practice setting.

Figure 13. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Anticipated Debt Upon Graduation



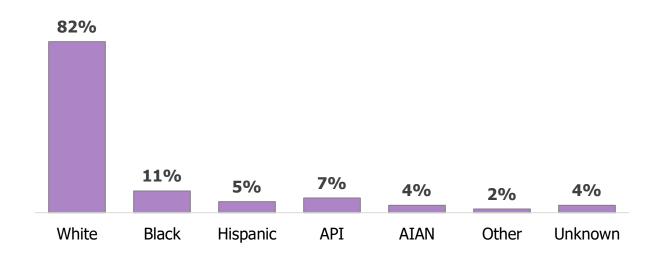
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by anticipated debt after graduation. Approximately 2% of respondents did not respond to this question (unknown).

Figure 12. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Reported Gender



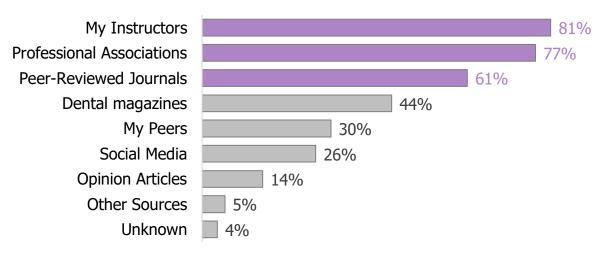
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by gender. Approximately 2% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown).

Figure 13. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Reported Race and Ethnicity



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by race and ethnicity. API = Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native Hawaiian; AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; Other race and ethnicity includes respondents who identified as Iraqi. Approximately 4% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one race or ethnicity.

Figure 14. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Preferred Information Source



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by preferred information source to learn more about dental therapy. Approximately 4% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one information source.

What Factors Influence Initiation of a Career in Dental Therapy?

The 57 respondents who expressed interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy were asked follow-up questions on the estimated time for enrolling into an education program, factors that would make the dental therapy profession enticing, barriers to pursing dental therapy education, and on their ability to relocate for education.



Of the 57 respondents, 51 respondents (89%) would consider enrolling into a dental therapy education program within the next three years; 12 respondents (21%) could enroll as soon as possible, 14 respondents (25%) would enroll within the next year, and 25 respondents (44%) could enroll within the next two to three years.



Several elements made the dental therapy position appealing to respondents – helping underserved communities, having a broader scope of practice, career advancement, more autonomy with work tasks, and higher wages.



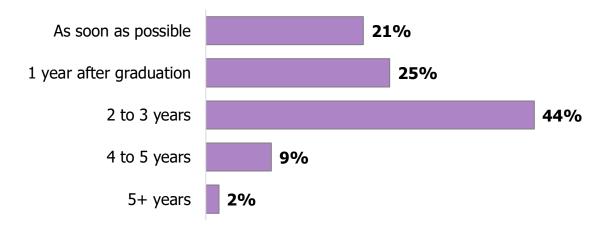
When asked about the barriers to pursuing a dental therapy education, 77% of respondents selected cost of tuition; having to relocate was selected by 44% of respondents, having a bachelor degree prerequisite was selected by 44% of respondents, and having to reduce work hours was selected by 41% of respondents.



Of the 57 respondents, 17 respondents (30%) said they would be willing to relocate to another part of the state for dental therapy education; 17 respondents (49%) reported they did not know if they would be willing to relocate in Michigan. Twenty-nine of the 57 respondents (51%) would not be willing to relocate to another state, however, 6 respondents (11%) said they would be willing to relocate to another state for dental therapy education.

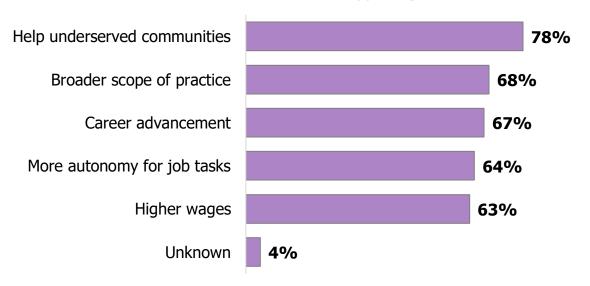
Detailed figures are presented on pages 18-20.

Figure 15. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Estimated
Time for Enrollment



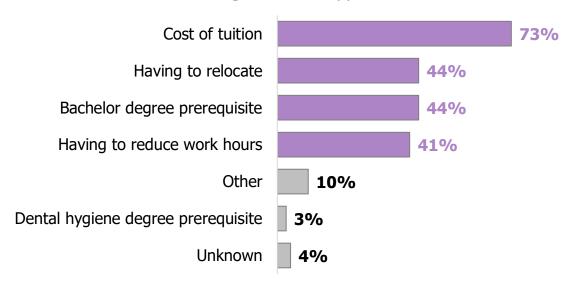
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by the estimated time for enrolling into a dental therapy education program after graduation from current education program.

Figure 16. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Elements that Make the Profession Appealing



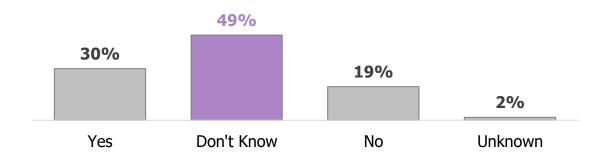
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by factors that make the dental therapy profession appealing. Approximately 4% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one element.

Figure 17. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Barriers to Pursuing Dental Therapy Education



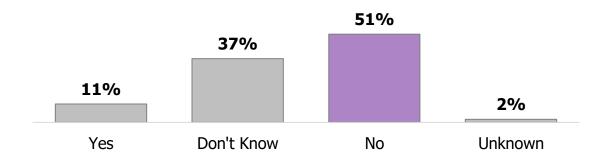
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by perceived barriers to pursuing a dental therapy education. Approximately 4% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one barrier. Other barriers specified by respondents included family duties, location of dental therapy schools (e.g., no programs in Michigan), and dental therapists' salary (e.g., similar to dental hygienist, less than dentist).

Figure 18. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Willingness to Relocate to Another Area in Michigan



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by their willingness to relocate to another area of Michigan to complete dental therapy education. Approximately 2% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown).

Figure 19. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Willingness to Relocate to Another State



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by their willingness to relocate to another state to complete dental therapy education. Approximately 2% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown).



"I believe education to obtain a license in dental therapy should be available in the state of Michigan. By making this profession obtainable, we bridge the gap between low socioeconomic status and access to dental care." – Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

What Could Make Dental Therapy Education More Feasible?

The 57 respondents who expressed interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy were asked for their opinion of the degree requirement for dental therapists and on the elements that would make the program most feasible for them to pursue.



In Michigan, dental therapy education must be three academic years in length with no specific degree requirement. Respondents were asked which degree level they thought was acceptable. Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) said a bachelor's degree, 39% said an associate's degree, and 32% said a master's degree.



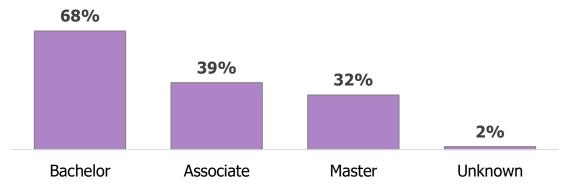
Most respondents (84%) reported that online classes would make dental therapy education feasible for them; offering clinicals during business hours was selected by 46% of respondents, offering clinical during the evenings was selected by 42% of respondents, and offering clinical on the weekends was selected by 40% of respondents.



"I feel like more students would be open to continue their education if a bachelor degree was not needed. A lot of students want to further their education but cannot simply afford to...I have spent so much money. I am completely maxed out on student loans leaving me with not being able to obtain a bachelor degree to further my education in any way as much as I want to." — First Year Dental Assisting Student

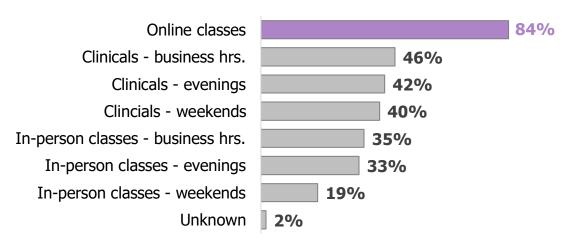
Detailed figures are presented on page 22.





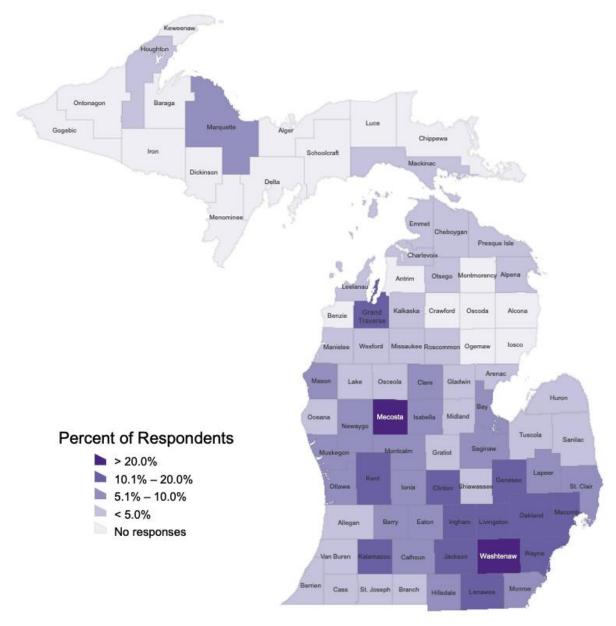
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by which degree level they viewed as acceptable for a dental therapist. Approximately 2% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one degree level.

Figure 21. Respondents Interested in a Potential Career in Dental Therapy by Elements to Make Dental Therapy Education Most Feasible



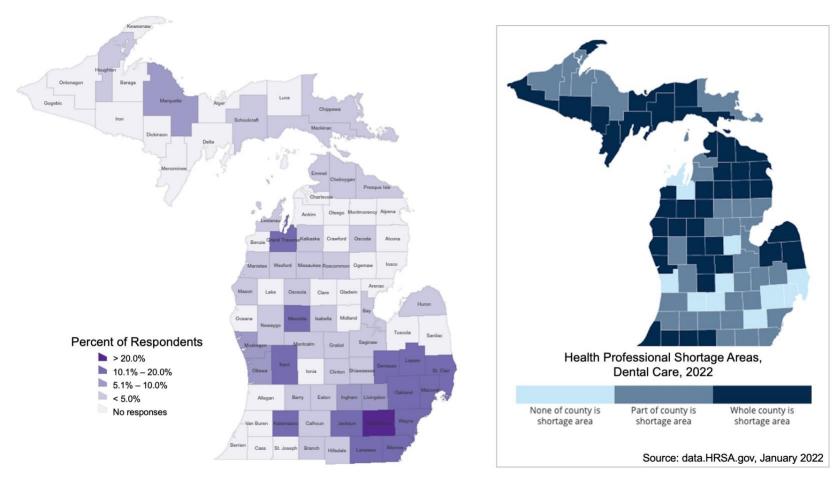
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents who indicated interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy (n=57) by elements that would make pursuing dental therapy education most feasible. Approximately 2% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (Unknown). Categories were not mutually exclusive as respondents could select more than one element.

Where in Michigan Would Respondents Consider Attending a Dental Therapy Education Program in-Person?



Respondents were asked what county they would consider attending school in-person. Approximately 2% of respondents reported that they had no preference and 7% did not provide an answer the question. Of the remaining 52 respondents, 65% of respondents selected more than one county. Compared to other counties, more respondents would consider attending a dental therapy education program in the counties of Washtenaw (27%), Mecosta (25%), Jackson (19%), Wayne (19%), Grand Traverse (17%), Kalamazoo (17%), Oakland (17%), Kent (15%), Genesee (13%), Ingham (13%), Macomb (13%), Clinton (12%), Lenawee (12%), and Livingston (12%).

Where in Michigan Would Respondents Choose to Practice as a Dental Therapist?



Respondents were asked in what county they would consider to practice as a dental therapist. Approximately 11% of respondents had no preference and 14% did not provide an answer the question. Of the remaining 43 respondents, 53% of respondents selected more than one county. Compared to other counties, more respondents would consider practicing as a dental therapist in the counties of Washtenaw (23%), Oakland (19%), Wayne (19%), Jackson (16%), Genesee (14%), Grand Traverse (14%), Lenawee (14%), Macomb (14%), Mecosta (14%), and St. Clair (14%).

COMMENTS

What Comments Did Respondents Share?

Respondents were offered an open space to share any additional thoughts or comments about dental therapy and 20 of the 93 respondents (22%) provided comments. Responses were reviewed and organized based on common ideas. The following key themes that emerged related to dental therapy education, access to oral health care, and the role of the dental therapist on the dental care team.



Dental Therapy Education. Many comments related to education programs for dental therapy. Some respondents commented that they looked forward to having an established program but also expressed that the lack of available programs in Michigan may mean missed opportunities for current students. Other comments related to barriers to pursing additional education. Some challenges noted were finding personal time and financing for education while also supporting their families and the length of time for dental therapy education and training.

"I think that it is notable to realize that the longer it takes [for an education program] to come to fruition, the less likely it is that I would be able to participate in a program and that this may be the case for others with at least a bachelors."— Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

"I feel like more students would be open to continue their education if a bachelor degree was not needed. A lot of students want to further their education but cannot simply afford to...As a hygiene student I have spent so much money. I am completely maxed out on student loans leaving me with not being able to obtain a bachelor degree to further my education in any way as much as I want to."— First Year Dental Assisting Student

"Although I believe dental therapy would improve access to care, I personally would not complete the program because I could take another year or so of classes and be a licensed DDS."— Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

"I think that dental therapy would be a great option for many in the state of Michigan. I worry that, with the amount of time needed for the degree, if most would find it worth doing instead of dental school."— First Year Dental Hygiene Student



Access to Dental Care. Some respondents commented on the ability of the dental therapy model to increase access to oral health care within underserved populations, while others expressed concern about public acceptance of a dental therapist.

"I really like the scope of practice of a dental therapist and the benefits it will provide to underserved communities. I want to work in underserved communities as a dental hygienist and would like to provide as much treatment as I can to my patients."— First Year Dental Hygiene Student

"I believe education to obtain a license in dental therapy should be available in the state of Michigan. By making this profession obtainable, we bridge the gap between low socioeconomic status and access to dental care."— Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

"Great idea to provide more opportunities for people in rural areas to get dental care. Education in the community is key!" – First Year Dental Assisting Student

"...I would not trust a dental therapist to complete my dental work unless they were VERY experienced (needing more than 500 hours

to be licensed), so I don't expect the public to be either." – Second Year Dental Hygiene Student



Role of Dental Therapists. A few respondents commented on the role of the dental therapist. Some expressed concerns that the tasks that fall within a dental therapist's scope of work would be in direct competition with dental hygienists and dentists and could negatively affect the salary for dental hygienists.

"I think a lot would have to go into bringing dental therapy to Michigan. I know that it is its own entity but all the numbers would have to be considered. Ensuring that it does not affect a hygienist's job market or a dentist's. Us dental professionals know that they are three separate jobs but would everyone else look at it that way?"— Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

"I don't like that it will affect hygiene pay." – Second Year Dental Hygiene Student

CONCLUSIONS

Support for Dental Therapy. Most of the dental hygiene and dental assisting students who responded to the survey had a favorable opinion of dental therapy. The majority believed that dental therapists would improve access to care in underserved areas of Michigan and would provide high quality of care to their patients.

Reaching Underserved Populations. Although most respondents acknowledged that oral health disparities exist due to lack of access and agreed that all providers have a responsibility to provide care to underserved populations, only 15% of total respondents were interested in practicing in a public health setting within the profession they are being trained for. This percentage increased to 23% for respondents interested in dental therapy. This should be seen as a call to action to broaden the education, encouragement, and incentives around public health practice within the allied dental professions.

Education Programs. Out of all respondents to this survey, over half would consider pursuing education within the next three years, indicating that dental therapy programs in Michigan will be sustainable. The majority felt that a bachelor's would be an appropriate degree level and that online classes would be a desirable feature of a dental therapy program.

Recruitment. To promote innovation in dental workforce models such as dental therapy, we should put special focus on engaging top information sources: instructors, professional associations, and peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, recruitment efforts should not only focus on community health settings, but also private practices as our survey results showed a demand within private practitioners.

Misinformation About Dental Therapy. The Michigan dental community is early in its learning curve about the dental therapy profession. Just over half of the respondents to this survey felt they had a good understanding of the dental therapist's role in the dental team. Furthermore, many of the responses and comments indicated either a lack of awareness or misunderstandings about dental therapy. Considering these students will graduate into a workforce that includes dental therapists, it is especially important to ensure that thorough and accurate information reaches them before they begin practicing.

NEXT STEPS



Engage with dental hygiene and dental assisting instructors to ensure they have a robust understanding of dental therapy and to encourage promoting public health career paths to students.



Provide informational sessions on dental therapy and public health career paths during education programs.



Utilize the most-cited sources for information about dental therapy to disseminate accurate information, including student associations, professional associations, and peer-reviewed journals.



Distribute this report to the Michigan dental professional communities, dental educators, dental and allied dental students, foundations supportive of dental initiatives, oral health coalitions, associations, and other supportive organizations.

RESOURCES

For additional information about dental therapy:

- Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany, State University of New York, May 2022: <u>Provider and Patient</u> Satisfaction With the Dental Therapy Workforce at Apple Tree Dental
- Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany, State University of New York, August 2020: <u>The Contributions of</u> <u>Dental Therapists and Advanced Dental Therapists in the Dental Centers of</u> <u>Apple Tree Dental in Minnesota</u>
- National Partnership for Dental Therapy
- MI Dental Access

METHODS

The 26-question survey was administered via Survey Monkey, an online survey software company. The survey was open from March 22, 2022 to April 22, 2022. Questions on respondents' attitudes toward dental therapy were adapted from a previous study¹ using a three-item categorical scale (agree, disagree, and don't know). Of respondents who indicated some or a lot of interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy or who were unsure about a dental therapy career, follow-up questions were used to gather more information. These questions were used to identify a timeframe for potentially enrolling into a dental therapy education program, contributing factors and barriers to pursuing dental therapy education, ideal scheduling for classes and clinicals, willingness to relocate for dental therapy education, and preferred region to work in as a dental therapist. To gain a deeper understanding of how dental therapy was perceived by respondents, an open-ended question asking for additional thoughts or comments about dental therapy was included at the end of the survey. Demographic questions asked about type of current education program, year of study in current program, geographic region of attendance in program, anticipated debt after graduation, race or ethnicity, and gender.

To reach students, an email invitation with a survey link was sent to key contacts of dental hygiene and dental assisting education programs in Michigan in which a request was made to forward the email invitation to their relevant students. Key contacts included program directors, program coordinators, or deans of allied health departments representing sixteen academic institutions. The institutions contacted included Bay College, Delta College, Ferris State University, Grand Rapids Community College, Jackson College, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kellogg Community College, Lansing Community College, Macomb Community College, Mott Community College, Northwestern Michigan College, Oakland Community College, University of

¹ Lopez, N., Blue, Christine Mary, Self, Karl D. "Dental School Faculty Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward the New Dental Therapy Model." *Journal of Dental Education*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 383-394, 2012.

Detroit Mercy, University of Michigan, Washtenaw Community College, and Wayne County Community College.

There are limitations to these findings. As this study used a convenience sample to survey dental hygiene and dental assisting students, findings are not generalizable to the population of students as a whole, especially as dental assisting students represented a very small percentage of respondents. Also, students who either felt strongly in favor of or strongly opposed to dental therapy may have been more likely to complete the survey.

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Report prepared by Wingspan Research Group www.WingspanResearch.com

