

# Perspectives on Dental Therapy in Michigan: Key Findings from a Statewide Survey

By Savanna Clore, RDH

## Introduction

Approximately two and a half million Michigan residents are without dental insurance, and over three million are enrolled in Medicaid.<sup>1</sup> Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) estimates that in Michigan 862,159 people reside in dental health professional shortage areas (DHPSAs) and that less than half of the need for dental services in these DHPSAs is met.<sup>1</sup> A new licensed dental professional, known as a dental therapist, has been established as a strategy for improving access to dental care within underserved regions and communities in Michigan.<sup>2</sup> Dental therapists aim to reduce barriers to dental care by providing routine preventive and restorative care under the supervision of a licensed dentist within DHPSA areas and/or low-income communities. The challenge for implementing this strategy is that Michigan does not currently offer a Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) accredited dental therapy education program, requiring interested students to relocate for up to three years to receive appropriate education and training.<sup>3</sup>

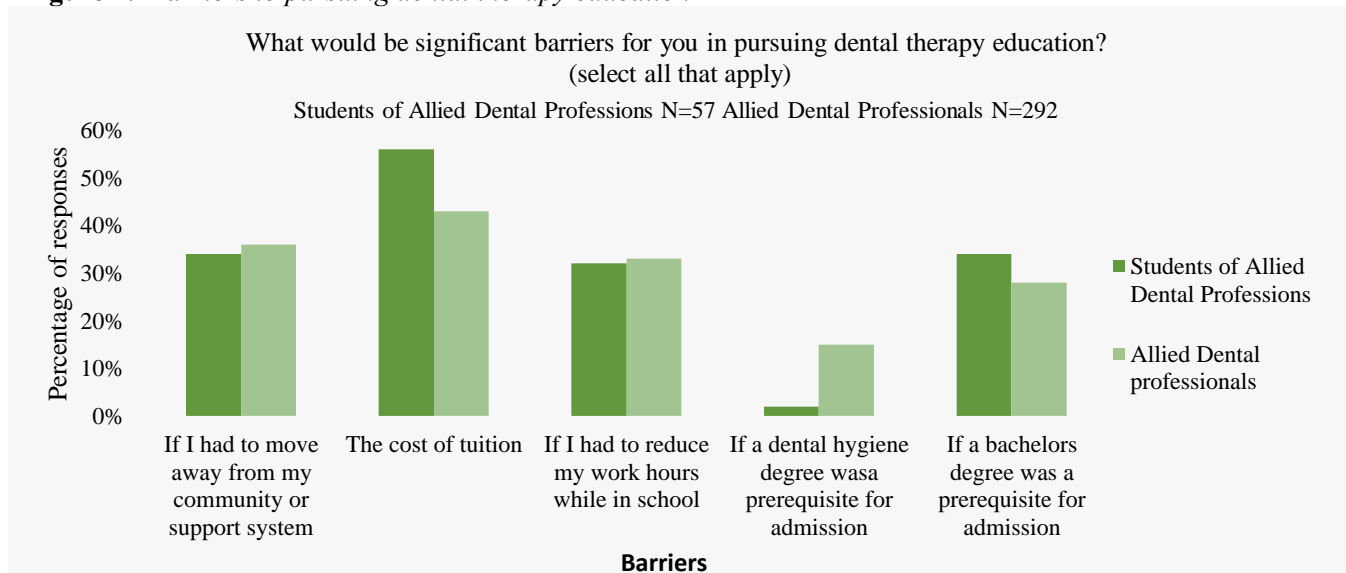
## Purpose

Now that advocacy efforts have forged a path for dental therapists to practice in Michigan, educational institutions need support to develop training programs that not only meet the CODA standards but also the needs of prospective students. The purpose of this summary is to explore prospective dental therapy students' identified barriers and preferences in pursuing dental therapy education in Michigan and make recommendations for institutions based on the results.

## Methods and Results

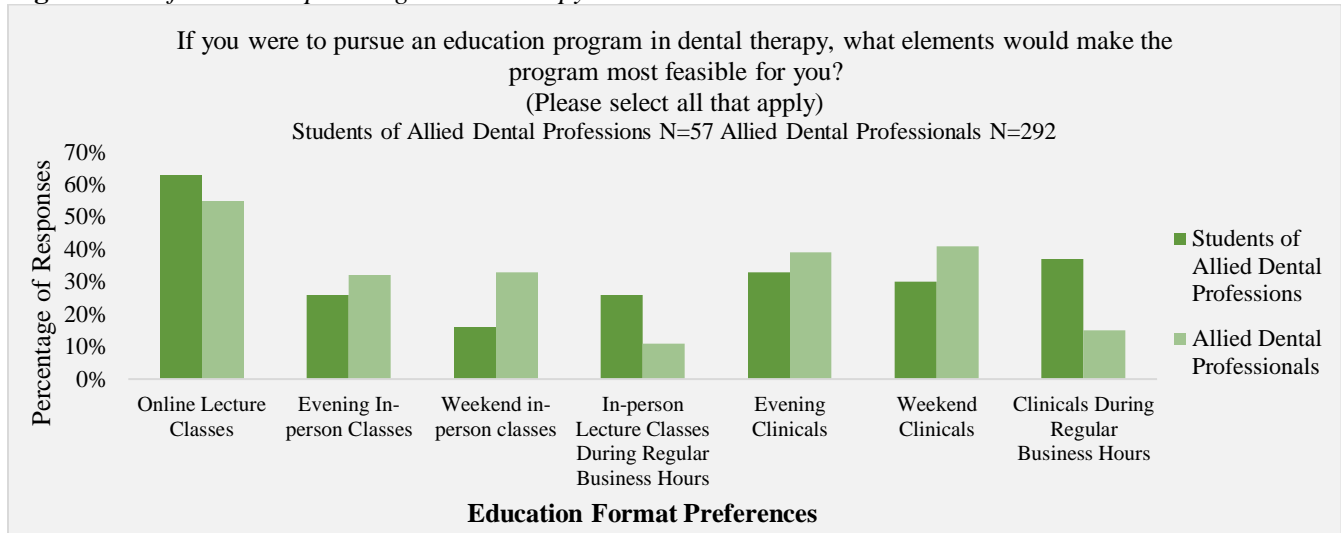
A questionnaire survey was conducted by the Michigan Primary Care Association in 2022 to evaluate perspectives on dental therapy in Michigan. Surveys were distributed to licensed Michigan dentists, allied dental professionals (dental hygienists and assistants), and students of each respective education program. Responses shown are allied dental professionals and students of allied dental profession education programs who expressed interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy. Dentists and dental students were excluded from the data as they do not fit the criteria for potential dental therapy students.

**Figure 1.** Barriers to pursuing dental therapy education



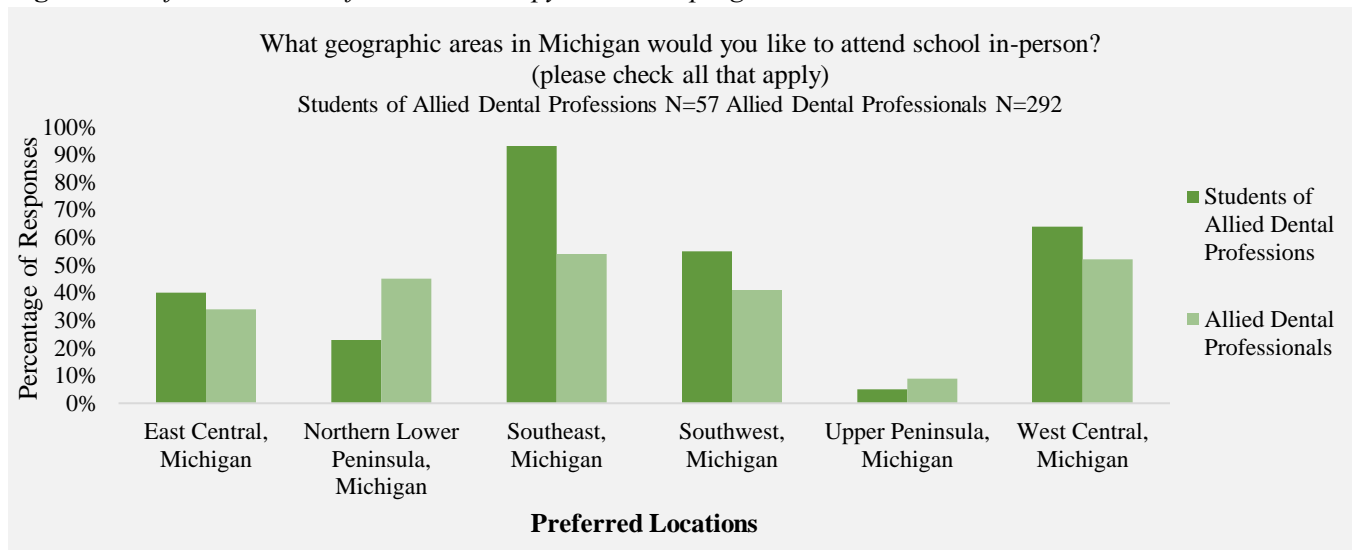
Note. Adapted from the Michigan Primary Care Association 2022 state-wide survey.

**Figure 2. Preferences in pursuing dental therapy education**



Note. Adapted from the Michigan Primary Care Association 2022 state-wide survey.

**Figure 3. Preferred location for dental therapy education program**



Note. Adapted from the Michigan Primary Care Association 2022 state-wide survey.

### Key Recommendations

There is a clear interest from dental hygiene students, dental assisting students, and allied dental professionals to pursue a degree in dental therapy. A dental therapy education program in Michigan that is CODA accredited and meets the needs of students would be highly pursued. It would also aid in efforts to reduce oral health disparities by supplying qualified licensed dental providers within underserved regions and communities of Michigan. When considering implementing a dental therapy program, it would benefit institutions to consider incorporating loan options in collaboration with organizations like the HRSA. This organization offers loan repayment following two years of service in a DHPSA.<sup>4</sup> They may also consider location preferences of students in combination with health professional shortage areas. Finally, they may consider limiting the prerequisites for entry into the DT program, as a key identified barrier was requiring a bachelor's degree for admission.

#### References

1. Michigan Oral Health Coalition. 2025 Michigan State Oral Health Plan. Lansing (MI): Michigan Oral Health Coalition; 2021.16p.
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4. Health Resources and Services Administration [internet]. Rockford (MD): Health Resources and Services Administration; c2023 [cited 2023 June 8]. Available from: <https://bhwh.hrsa.gov/funding/apply-loan-repayment>



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