Perspectives

Retaining New Dentists in Iowa: A Role for Dental Schools in Facilitating Graduates’ Connections to Practice Opportunities in Underserved Areas


Abstract: Like many other states, Iowa has an aging dental workforce. As this aging population of dentists retires and communities are unable to find new dentists to take over their practices, more small and rural communities lack easy access to oral health care. The University of Iowa College of Dentistry and Dental Clinics established the Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities in 2006 to promote dental practice opportunities in Iowa for its graduates. With this office, an infrastructure connecting the college with practices and communities across the state has been developed. The Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities is the first place many students go to decide what they will do after graduation and to identify practice opportunities in Iowa. The office has exceeded the college’s initial expectations and has provided significant assistance in retaining recently graduated dentists in the state of Iowa and ensuring access to oral health care in the state. This article will show that facilitating connections to practice opportunities has a place in a college of dentistry.

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In 2006, it became notable that Iowa had an aging dental workforce. Approximately 54 percent of practicing dentists were over fifty years of age, and only 23 percent were under forty years of age. At the same time, seventy-nine of ninety-nine Iowa counties were federally designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (DHPSAs). As the aging population of dentists was retiring and communities were unable to find new dentists to take over their practices, more small communities were lacking easy access to dental care.

The replacement of dentists in Iowa communities up to that time had relied on the initiative of individual dentists, for-profit practice brokers, and non-dentist community leaders. There had been little coordination of these efforts or sharing of effective solutions to common problems. The University of Iowa College of Dentistry and Dental Clinics had long been identified by practitioners, communities, graduates, and students as a logical place to share or seek information about practice opportunities in Iowa. However, these contacts had been handled informally and on an ad hoc basis by the college’s faculty and staff.

In 2006, over 75 percent of Iowa dentists were alumni of The University of Iowa College of Dentistry and Dental Clinics, and 75 percent of admitted predoctoral students were Iowa residents. As a result, access to students and ongoing relationships with alumni and state resources put the college in a good position to coordinate a process of matching Iowa practice opportunities with dental students and residents seeking practice sites. To make use...
of that position to help address the predicted dentist workforce shortage, the college created the Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities (OIPO) in June 2006 to promote dental practice opportunities in Iowa. A grant proposal was submitted to Delta Dental of Iowa, which provided $150,000 over three years to fund the program. In January 2009, the college applied for additional grant funding from Delta Dental of Iowa and received $75,000 for an additional three years. In 2010, the Iowa Rural Dental Health Initiative grant secured by Delta Dental of Iowa from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) allocated $50,000 for a coordinator for the OIPO. Since 2006, the College of Dentistry has provided monetary and in-kind support beyond what was covered by the grants. In 2012, the college committed ongoing funding for the OIPO.

Currently, an advisory committee comprised of representatives from the Iowa Department of Public Health, Delta Dental of Iowa, the Iowa Dental Association, and the college suggests strategies for effective graduate retention and community outreach and provides input on measurement of outcomes for the OIPO. A full-time Iowa practice opportunities coordinator hired in January 2007 manages the office and coordinates and facilitates communication among practices, students, and graduates. This article describes how this office coordinates a statewide effort to connect dental students with practitioners and community leaders and therefore helps address a dental workforce shortage and improve access to dental care in underserved areas.

Objectives of Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities

The OIPO along with its advisory committee has defined a set of six objectives that help to focus the office’s efforts and provide a way to measure its results. These objectives are as follows.

1. Develop and maintain a web-accessible database. Prior to the establishment of the OIPO, information on practice opportunities known to the college was not readily accessible to graduating students since lists were kept in a binder stored in the student affairs office. By contrast, the OIPO developed and maintains a searchable database, and an Iowa Practice Opportunities link is provided on the college’s homepage, making listings readily available via the Internet. For sources that do not wish their opportunities to be viewed publicly or are outside the state, a locally managed file is maintained to allow interested parties to view the information in person in the OIPO office. For the public listings, Iowa practices and communities provide a description of their opportunity and their community, photos of the practice and community, and contact information. The coordinator gives advice and guidance to dentists and communities on how to present their opportunity in the most effective and attractive manner. Practice opportunities are updated on a semiannual basis to maintain the site’s validity and credibility.

2. Coordinate a Student-Mentor Program. Since 2008-09, the OIPO has been coordinating a Student-Mentor Program that matches interested dental students with practicing dentists in Iowa willing to serve as practitioner mentors. Along with providing the students with advice, support, and job shadowing, the program helps to reaffirm the benefits of practicing in the state. Coordinating this program gives the OIPO additional exposure and visibility with both practicing dentists and students.

3. Develop a network of partners to assist in identifying and working with communities seeking a dentist. The OIPO is a key stakeholder in the Fulfilling Iowa’s Need for Dentists (FIND) project in which it works closely with Delta Dental of Iowa and the Iowa Area Development Group. This partnership has been ongoing since 2008 as a public, private, and nonprofit collaboration to recruit dentists to practice in federally identified shortage areas. In 2008 and 2010, Delta Dental of Iowa applied for a HRSA grant to establish FIND. A component of the project is to provide up to $100,000 in dental education loan repayment for a dentist who chooses to practice in a designated shortage area. Initially, Delta Dental of Iowa committed $50,000, the HRSA grant provided $30,000, and the practicing dentist’s community provided $20,000 for each recipient. In state fiscal year 2012 and 2013, HRSA no longer provided monies, but the state of Iowa appropriated $50,000 both fiscal years for the loan repayment. The contributions from each entity were then restructured with Delta Dental of Iowa committing $50,000, the state of Iowa contributing $25,000, and the practicing dentist’s community matching the state’s contribution with $25,000. Currently, there may be two recipients each year.

The Iowa Area Development Group brings valuable community connections to the project through its work with rural electric cooperatives,
municipal utilities, and independent telephone companies. These connections bring additional financial assistance and incentives for new dentists starting to practice in a community. The OIPO assists students and graduates in identifying FIND-eligible communities, facilitates communication between students/graduates and key community representatives (a current practicing dentist, an economic development representative, etc.), and advises eligible students/graduates about the loan repayment program and application.

Through FIND outreach, the coordinator has received numerous opportunities to build community connections that benefit the OIPO. In a presentation at a statewide community foundation meeting with the Iowa Area Development Group, she introduced attendees to FIND and made them aware of the role it can play in recruiting a dentist to their area. Another example of FIND’s outreach is attending and exhibiting at the annual Iowa Governor’s Conference on Public Health; at these meetings, the coordinator has educated the public health workforce in Iowa about the OIPO. The coordinator also attends U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Roundtables in Iowa communities. Attendance at the roundtables is comprised of local and county economic development groups, Chambers of Commerce, city council members, county supervisors, local business owners, local bankers, members of Congress or their staff, and community members. The USDA rural development state director makes introductions at the beginning of each roundtable and introduces the OIPO and FIND. The first year the OIPO started, the coordinator traveled to the Iowa Dental Association’s ten district meetings to introduce the program to the state’s practicing dentists. Since 2007, the coordinator has attended and exhibited at the annual state Iowa Dental Association meeting.

4. Sponsor presentations to dental students highlighting the advantages of practice in Iowa and providing information on resources available. Every fall, the coordinator makes a presentation to each dental class during orientation, explaining the operations and resources available through the OIPO. Resources include the Iowa Dentist Tracking System (a regularly updated database of all licensed dentists in Iowa), the American Dental Association’s state and county demographic reports, community contacts, and available practice opportunities. In addition, the coordinator assists students in writing a resume and cover letter, arranges their trips to communities, and guides them through the process of seeking a practice opportunity. In these ways, the OIPO’s function as a connection to Iowa opportunities is emphasized.

Annually, the benefits of practicing in Iowa, with a rural emphasis, are highlighted at a dinner to which students and their significant others are invited. The dinner features a panel of dentists, who speak about why they chose to practice in a rural community and the pros and cons of doing so, and dentist spouses, who speak about the situation from their perspective. In addition, community and economic development representatives speak about the benefits of having a dentist in a community, why their community has recruited a new dentist, and the type of assistance they are able to offer. Recently, an educational component was added to the dinner, and a construction company that builds dental offices made a presentation about the steps to starting a practice on one’s own.

Lunch and Learns at the college provide another platform to increase the visibility of OIPO and educate students. Delta Dental of Iowa makes annual Lunch and Learn presentations about its educational loan repayment program and the FIND project. The Iowa Area Development Group has also made presentations about its role in rural communities, how it can assist students in connecting with appropriate persons in communities, and financial and other incentives that may be available. Other presentations include information on associateships, understanding credit reports, and related topics of interest to students that augment the value of the OIPO.

5. Travel to Iowa communities (especially small rural communities) to help them recruit dentists. The coordinator travels to rural Iowa communities interested in recruiting a new dentist to their community and provides phone consultations as well. The coordinator meets with community leaders to develop strategic recruitment packages for new dentists and provides assistance to these communities and dentists in developing approaches to appeal to students. Some communities are recruiting a dentist to replace a retiring dentist and some to address an identified need. For some communities, this assistance means simply helping them advertise on the college’s website, while other communities are starting with no more than an idea that recruitment is something they should do. In communities at the beginning stage of recruitment, the coordinator helps community representatives identify key stakeholders to serve on a recruitment task force, anticipate how a recruit might view a community personally and professionally, and design types of incentives the
community might offer. Because each recruit’s needs differ, communities are cautioned that incentive packages cannot be one-size-fits-all. In addition, communities are advised that they can define their own expectations for a dentist to move to their area. After the establishment of FIND, representatives from the Iowa Area Development Group have attended the coordinator’s meetings with communities. Their knowledge of financial resources like low-interest loans and loan repayment matching funds through their partners adds details to what a community might be able to offer.

Assistance is offered to Iowa dentists via phone and in-person meetings as well. The dentists are informed of the type of information those seeking an opportunity are interested in knowing. They are advised that when trying to recruit an associate or sell their practice, they need to sell their community as well. Collaboration with their community is recommended when appropriate. The coordinator also offers assistance to network with and educate community representatives about the importance of having a dentist remain in their community from a health care and an economic development standpoint. Working with communities and dentists in this manner has proven beneficial for the coordinator. It provides the coordinator the chance to learn about the communities and opportunities in order to better help all parties involved.

6. Facilitate communications between students and those offering practice opportunities. Before the OIPO was created, an Iowa Practice Opportunity Fair was held on one day at the college, but attendance was generally low due to the conflicting class and clinic schedules. In the fall of 2007, the Iowa Practice Opportunity Fair was combined with the Iowa American Student Dental Association (IASDA)’s annual vendor fair, moved to a new venue, and held after hours. Each year, the fair is advertised on the OIPO’s website and in the July issue of the Iowa Dental Journal. An email or letter is sent inviting practices and communities with a current opportunity listing to participate. The coordinator works with IASDA’s fundraising chairs to plan, coordinate, and implement the combined fair.

In addition to the fair, the coordinator frequently meets with students to discuss what type of opportunity they are looking for, where they would like to practice, and what they would like long-term. Based on the students’ response, the coordinator shares what is available and contact information for opportunities that fit their criteria. In the event that an opportunity is not identified in the area, the coordinator makes suggestions for how to network with dentists and other key contacts in the area.

As part of the services offered by the OIPO, the coordinator arranges for students and their significant others to visit communities and to meet with community representatives and retiring dentists. Trips are coordinated for individuals or groups; the coordinator accompanies the students when requested. For example, in the fall of 2010, a FIND Connections Tour was conducted to Fort Dodge and Clarion, Iowa, by representatives from the Iowa Area Development Group and the OIPO. In Fort Dodge, students were greeted by many of the practicing general dentists and specialists, as well as a Chamber of Commerce representative. A tour of the community was given that highlighted Fort Dodge. In Clarion, the students were met by community leaders and the community’s only full-time dentist. A lunch was provided as well as a tour of their community. Transportation to the communities was offered by the OIPO along with the option to travel separately.

Results

Prior to the inception of the OIPO, demographics data showed the number of dentists under thirty years of age and in the thirty-to-thirty-nine-year range had been stagnant, and the number of dentists forty to forty-nine years of age had decreased while the number of dentists over fifty had increased. From 2006 to 2011, after the OIPO was established, the number of dentists under the age of forty increased 77 percent and now accounts for 29 percent of the dental workforce in Iowa1 (Table 1 and Figure 1). Over that time, the number of counties identified as Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas declined from seventy-nine to sixty-eight counties.2

The level of involvement of the Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities has varied in placements. For some, the OIPO was given information about the practice opportunity, the information was placed on the website, and the person who accepted the opportunity found it searching the website. Other placements involved the coordinator meeting with the community and/or dentist, helping identify incentives, meeting or speaking with a student or graduate regarding the opportunity, and facilitating the connection.

The results of these initiatives are significant. As of June 30, 2012, there have been 141 placements
for practices in sixty-three Iowa communities as a result of connections with the OIPO (Figure 2). One hundred twenty-eight placements were graduates of The University of Iowa College of Dentistry and Dental Clinics, and thirteen were non-University of Iowa graduates. Seventy placements were in rural opportunities. An average of twenty-five students have pursued Iowa practice opportunities following graduation each year. The average size of a graduating class is seventy-five.

The college’s students are utilizing the office more than ever and earlier rather than later in their

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<th>30-39 Years</th>
<th>40-49 Years</th>
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<th>60-69 Years</th>
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Figure 1. Age distribution of Iowa dentists, 1997, 2006, and 2011
education. There was nearly a twofold increase in students and graduates consulting the OIPO from academic years 2007 to 2011. When 2008 graduates were surveyed a year after graduation, six of the nine who responded said they sought assistance from the office, and all six said they found the assistance helpful. When 2009 graduates were surveyed, eighteen of the twenty-four who responded said they sought assistance from the office, and seventeen of eighteen said they found the assistance helpful.

Since the office was established, six students have had visits to three communities facilitated. One student chose to start a practice in one of the communities after the visit. Five students participated in the FIND Connections Tour in fall 2010. None of the students chose to practice in those locations, but their feedback indicated they felt the tour was very beneficial. Four of the five students who participated in the tour graduated; three of those four chose to practice in Iowa. Due to interest expressed, it was decided that more visits to additional communities and areas of the state would be planned in the future.

The coordinator has provided phone consultation to eight communities and traveled to nine communities that wanted to recruit a dentist. Eight communities successfully recruited a dentist with the assistance of the OIPO (Figure 3). In addition, a representative from the Iowa Area Development Group and the coordinator met with a dentist and discussed how FIND partners could help work with the community and the recruitment of the dentist’s replacement. Working with communities and dentists in this manner has enabled the coordinator to better understand the opportunity and assist all parties involved.

Representatives from Delta Dental of Iowa, the Iowa Area Development Group, and the OIPO have met with the community and county economic development groups and community leaders to explain each of their roles in the FIND project and the benefits a dentist brought to the community. Following those meetings, the groups decided to commit matching funds, which have provided seven dentists up to $100,000 each in dental education loan repayment. Two dentists have also received low-interest loans from the rural electric cooperative’s revolving loan fund, and one dentist has received a USDA Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant (REDLG) instead of a loan from a financial institution.
of the OIPO and the hiring of a coordinator. Since it started, an infrastructure has been developed, as well as an expansion of the original objectives. The OIPO is the first place many students go when trying to decide what they will do after graduation and to identify opportunities in Iowa.

An unexpected use of the coordinator position has been for guidance on how to write a resume, how to approach a practice or community, long-term career planning, and more. Students know they want to be a dentist, but they do not always know what the right opportunity is for them. There is no one-size-fits-all path after they graduate. The coordinator spends time helping them identify what they want for themselves, and students are now doing this much earlier in their education.

The OIPO educates not only the college’s students and graduates, but Iowa’s state leaders, communities, and economic development entities. Outside the dental profession, many are not aware of state dental demographics or of the potential economic impact dentists have in an area. Through networking and outreach, the OIPO educates those

Conclusion

When the Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities was first established, a press release was sent by Delta Dental of Iowa, an article was placed in the Iowa Dental Journal, and a letter was sent to each practicing Iowa dentist announcing the establishment

Figure 3. The Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities’ successful community recruitment (green) and continued community recruitment (asterisks) across the state of Iowa
outside the profession about these topics as well as factors students consider when choosing a place to practice and live.

Not only has the Office of Iowa Practice Opportunities become an integral component to recruiting and retaining dentists in the state of Iowa, but its success should be suggestive for others outside the state. Since the inception of the OIPO, the coordinator has consulted with Marquette University School of Dentistry in the development of its Practice Placement Office. In addition, the Kansas Dental Association and Delta Dental of Kansas modeled their Kansas Initiative for New Dentists (KIND) after Iowa’s FIND project in providing loan repayment and mentoring. This interest from outside Iowa suggests there is a place for dental schools in facilitating connections to practice opportunities in dentistry and that our public, private, and nonprofit collaboration can be duplicated in other states. Based on our experiences in the state of Iowa and our consultations with surrounding states, we feel our program is one that could be used as a model for other educational or statewide dental organizations to help develop sustainable nationwide models for the placement of dentists in shortage areas.

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REFERENCES