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# The Need for New Qualified Dental Hygiene Educators

## **Description**

This study identifies current dental hygiene faculty expectations for skills/qualifications considered important for future faculty. Not only do current faculty prefer new faculty to possess a master's degree, it has been shown that clinical, educational and technological skills are also very important. It appears that current dental hygiene programs are unwilling to compromise their high standards when hiring future faculty, even though there is a clear indication of a dental hygiene faculty shortage nationwide. If imminent faculty vacancies are not filled with well-qualified individuals able to meet current student needs and advances in education delivery methods, there is a potential negative impact on dental hygiene education and the profession of dental hygiene as a whole.

The information found in this study has the potential to have a positive impact on dental hygiene education if, as a result, new educators with the skills to incorporate updated teaching practices are developed. The first step to achieving this goal is reporting the information found through this survey on current dental hygiene faculty perceptions' on important qualifications in future faculty members.

## **Disciplines**

Dentistry

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# The Need for New Qualified Dental Hygiene Educators

By **Amy E. Coplen, RDH, MS**

When I entered the graduate dental hygiene program at the University of Michigan in fall 2006, I had one goal in mind: to become an educator. Naturally I chose qualifications for future dental hygiene faculty as the topic of research for my thesis. Not only would I be able to study something of interest to me, I would also be able to obtain vital information on the qualifications I needed to be competitive when looking for a faculty position upon graduation.

As a result of my investigation, I learned that the profession of dental hygiene experienced a period of major growth in the 1960s and 1970s and continued to rise in popularity as a profession of choice thereafter. With that growth, the demand for dental hygiene programs increased along with the need for dental hygiene faculty.<sup>1</sup> A number of dental hygienists entered the profession of dental hygiene education during that time and have remained in these positions. At this time, many of the same faculty members are nearing retirement age. Presently, the majority of dental hygiene programs are primarily based in community college settings and grant associate-level degrees. The fact that dental hygiene educators are required to have at least a bachelor's degree makes it more difficult for dental hygienists interested in the field of education to obtain the credentials needed to apply for open faculty positions in dental hygiene programs.

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Being faced with the decision of whether or not to hire faculty with less than preferred credentials has become the major concern. Several reasons given for faculty vacancies include: only a few qualified individuals apply, candidates that do apply lack required academic qualifications, or no qualified candidates apply.<sup>2</sup> Another reason for these unfilled openings was budget limitations.<sup>3</sup> Two-thirds of program directors describe recruitment of qualified faculty as either very difficult (22 percent) or somewhat difficult (44 percent).<sup>4</sup> Several ways of coping with the educator shortage have been implemented, such as increasing the number of part-time faculty members, increasing the workload of current faculty, and/or hiring faculty with less than preferred credentials.

Over the past 20 years, program directors have been surveyed regarding the desired credentials for new faculty appointments. Some programs require a master's degree for full-time tenure track faculty; several programs prefer but do not require a master's degree.<sup>3,5</sup>

In addition to preferred academic credentials, several other important qualifications for future faculty have emerged. A survey of dental hygiene program directors asked an open-ended question about what graduate dental hygiene programs could do to better prepare students for academia.<sup>5</sup> Several interesting themes arose, such as a need for political or legislative knowledge, skills in research, experience in alternative teaching methods, leadership skills, communication skills and computer skills. In addition, when asked to report on topics requiring in-service training for faculty already holding a master's degree in dental hygiene, several technology-linked skills were identified. The major weakness of studies to date examining desired qualities and credentials of future faculty is that they have surveyed program directors only rather than all dental hygiene faculty.<sup>3,6-8</sup>

Based on these issues, my goal was to survey all dental hygiene faculty nationwide on their perceptions of qualifications needed in future faculty to get a more comprehensive view of the needs in dental hygiene education. This survey focused on four skills categories for future faculty: education, clinical dental hygiene, research and technology. Previous surveys have not assessed the importance of technological skills needed for teaching dental hygiene in the 21st century. Secondly, the survey measured the status of current dental hygiene faculty in the areas of age, experience, academic credentials and future plans.

## Results

Responses to this survey sent in October 2008 were received from 632 dental hygiene faculty nationwide, 149 respondents being program directors. Some demographic characteristics of the sample revealed the average age of faculty members was 50 years. The largest number of faculty were between the ages of 50 and 59 years (45 percent) followed by faculty members aged 40-49 years (24.5 percent). In the next five years, 60 (9.6 percent) faculty members plan to retire from the workforce. Of these, one-third are directors of dental hygiene programs. While 21 percent of the faculty surveyed indicate they have more than 20 years of experience, over half have 10 years or less experience. This study found that 8 percent of respondents in the sample are in their first year of teaching, a survey item that has not been measured in previous studies, indicating a large number of new faculty members entering the field of dental hygiene education. Interestingly, more than half of the sample in this study were over the age of 50, yet 53.2 percent of faculty had 10 years or less experience. These results indicate that newer faculty members in dental hygiene education are not necessarily younger. The highest degree earned by most dental hygiene faculty was a master's degree (53 percent), followed by a bachelor's degree (31 percent), a doctorate or DDS (13 percent), and an associate degree (3 percent).

Greater than 90 percent of current dental hygiene faculty perceived clinical, educational and technological skills as important for future faculty. Overall, the education skills were the most highly ranked by all faculty members, but being able to use technology has clearly become a very important skill for future faculty as well as clinical dental hygiene skills. Only 53 percent believed research skills were important in future faculty. It is disappointing to see that only half of all dental hygiene faculty believed that research skills are important for future faculty. Those who worked in the university setting were distinctly more likely to place importance on research-related skills than those who worked in community colleges ( $p < .0001$ ). Those with higher educational credentials also ranked research skills higher than other faculty ( $p = .013$ ). Older faculty ranked educational and clinical skills significantly higher than younger faculty ( $p = .005$ ,  $p = .006$ ).

## Conclusion

As faculty members continue to age, there is a challenge for dental hygiene education to recruit, educate and train new faculty. This study is the first to indicate a large number of faculty members retiring who hold the director position. Information regarding the retirement plans for dental hygiene directors is important for long-term plans of dental hygiene programs and for ADHA leaders who monitor professional education of the dental hygienist.

This study identified current faculty expectations for skills/qualifications considered important for future faculty. Not only do current faculty prefer new faculty to possess a master's degree, it has been shown that clinical, educational and technological skills are also very important. It appears that current dental hygiene programs are unwilling to compromise their high standards when hiring future faculty, even though there is a clear indication of a dental hygiene faculty shortage nationwide. If imminent faculty vacancies are not filled with well-qualified individuals able to meet current student needs and advances in education delivery methods, there is a potential negative impact on dental hygiene education and the profession of dental hygiene as a whole. The information found in this study has the potential to have a positive impact on

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**Amy Coplen, RDH, MS, graduated from the University of Michigan with a master's degree in dental hygiene in August 2009. Amy presented a poster on this topic for the first annual graduate student research program at the Center for Lifelong Learning at the 86th Annual Session in Washington, D.C. She is currently an assistant professor at Pacific University in Hillsboro, Ore. She enjoys teaching in a bachelor's program with a strong community focus primarily treating Hispanic patients in their clinic.**

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