

Coaching that helps International Dentists successfully matriculate into Advanced Standing programs in the US

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1 | PROBLEM

One pathway to licensure for Internationally trained Dentists (ITD) in the United States is to complete an Advanced Standing (AS) program.¹ Such programs are competitive—at the University of Michigan, only 2% of applicants are accepted.² ITDs also face other barriers to licensure, including high tuition cost, immigration barriers, and cultural differences.³

To gain an interview invitation, schools review academic performance, letters of recommendation, personal statement (PS), curriculum vitae (CV) and overall candidate potential. Although schools have varied requirements to enter their AS programs, a few ingredients are common, such as strong interview performances and passing a bench test.^{4–8} Seeking success, these candidates pursue various strategies (often fueled by misinformation from other well-meaning ITDs), such as completing high-cost “observerships” to try to strengthen their applications. While programs that involve direct care delivery may broaden applicant perspectives, pure “observerships” add little to directly strengthen PSs, CVs, or interview performance. We constructed the Synergy Program that coached participants on the application process for AS programs.⁹

2 | SOLUTION

The Synergy Program’s content was based on surveys and focus groups of over 100 current/former AS students (see

Table 1). We also added content like how to choose your recommendation letter writers.

We created a low-cost, 27-contact-hour course to train applicants about the U.S. health care and education systems and about the AS application process. During the course, participants also received one-on-one feedback on CVs and PSs and had 4 feedback-driven practice interviews. Each student worked with 1 faculty mentor throughout the course. The course included several sessions related to culture that included discussion about “high-context” versus “low-context” cultures¹⁰ and how to navigate those differences when moving to the United States. In high-context cultures, rules of communication are conveyed through contextual elements (like body language) and are not clearly stated. However, in low-context cultures, information is communicated directly through language.

3 | RESULTS

The Synergy Program has had 3 iterations: the pilot had 2 students; the second iteration had 5, and the third had 10 students. Our course was effective in helping a diverse (10 different nationalities were represented) group successfully enter AS programs. The main defining characteristics of participants was that they were between the ages of 25 and 30, had wide-ranging previous academic performances, and most worked as dental assistants. Time since graduation varied between 1 and 12 years, with an average of 7.6 years.

TABLE 1 Topics covered in synergy program for foreign trained dentists

Strengthening application skills/interview performance
Writing CVs and personal statements
Practice interviews with feedback
Knowledge of healthcare and education in the US
Understanding of healthcare and dental education
Emerging trends in the dental profession
Introduction to the U.S healthcare system
Introduction to the U.S dental school environment
Introduction to the clinical expectations in the US
Strengthening pre-clinical skills
Equipment & Instrumentation in the US
Introduction to infection control in the US
Working effectively in a dental team

TABLE 2 Responses to the question “What did you gain from the program?”

Ranked from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important). N = 11 ^a	Score (SD)
Help improving my CV and personal statement	1.82 (1.70)
Gain practice with interviewing and multiple mini-interviews	2.27 (.96)
Meet US faculty	3.64 (1.15)
Visiting a US school of dentistry	4.82 (1.85)
Learn about dental education in the US	4.91 (1.98)
Meet current International Dental Program students	5.00 (1.04)
Learn about the US healthcare system and US dental profession	5.55 (1.30)

^aThis data are based on 11 students who were part of second and third cohorts.

3.1 | What went well

To date, 17 students have completed the course. Participants reported guidance with CV/PS and interviews most useful (Table 2). Prior to entering the Synergy Program, the 17 participants had, in aggregate, 33 failed application cycles without even 1 interview invitation—1 individual had 5 failed cycles. After participating in our course, 12 were successful in entering an AS in the very next cycle and 3 decided to pursue other pathways (residency or US dental hygiene program).

3.2 | What didn't go well

Unfortunately, 2 final participants remain unsuccessful in their applications.

3.3 | Lessons learned

Our program improved awareness about US culture, the AS application process, and the US health care and dental education systems. Additionally, our program resulted in student perceived improvement in written, verbal, and interview skills. These outcomes were highly effective in transforming applicants with histories of repeated failure into successful matriculants into AS programs.

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