

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

Nalliah RP¹, Ramaswamy V², Timothé P³.

1 – Associate Dean for Patient Services. University of Michigan School of Dentistry.

2 – Associate Director for Curriculum and Program Evaluation. University of Michigan School of Dentistry.

3 – Program Director, Dental Public Health Residency. Texas A & M College of Dentistry.

Corresponding Author.

Dr. Romesh P. Nalliah

Associate Dean for Patient Services

University of Michigan School of Dentistry

1011 N University, Ann Arbor, MI, 48105

Email: romeshn@umich.edu

Phone: 734-615-8057

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Coaching that helps international dentists successfully matriculate into advanced standing programs in the United States

Nalliah RP, Ramaswamy V, Timothé P.

Dr. Nalliah is Associate Dean for Patient Services, University of Michigan School of Dentistry; Dr. Ramaswamy is Associate Director for Curriculum and Program Evaluation, University of Michigan School of Dentistry; Dr. Timothé is Program Director, Dental Public Health Residency, Texas A & M College of Dentistry. Address correspondence to Dr. Romesh P. Nalliah, (734) 615-8057, romeshn@umich.edu.

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.¹ ITDs also face other barriers to licensure, including high tuition cost, immigration barriers, and cultural differences.²

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.³⁻⁷ 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.⁸

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 four feedback-driven practice interviews. Each student worked with one faculty mentor throughout the course. The course included several sessions related to culture that included discussion about "high-context" versus "low-context" cultures⁹ 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.

RESULTS

The Synergy Program has had three iterations—the pilot had two students; the second iteration had five, and the third had ten students. Our course was effective in helping a diverse (ten 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 one and 12 years, with an average of 7.6 years.

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 one interview invitation—one individual had five failed cycles. After participating in our course, 12 were successful in entering an AS in the very next cycle and three decided to pursue other pathways (residency or U.S. dental hygiene program).

What didn't go well

Unfortunately, two final participants remain unsuccessful in their applications.

Lessons Learned

Our program improved awareness about U.S. culture, the AS application process, and the U.S. 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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Table 1. Topics covered in Synergy Program for Foreign Trained Dentists
Strengthening Application skills/Interview performance
Writing CV's 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 U. S
Strengthening Pre-clinical skills
Equipment & Instrumentation in the U. S
Introduction to infection control in the U. S
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*	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)

*This data is based on 11 students who were part of second and third cohorts.