Alternative Careers for Women in Dentistry: Impact, Innovation, and Industry

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Until the 1960s, women comprised about 1% of dentists in the U.S. workforce. Women entering dental school at that time were blazing new career paths to which women previously had limited access. Like many of my colleagues who enrolled in dental school in the 1970s and 1980s, my career objective was to enter the private practice of dentistry. Dental students in this era were generally attracted to the profession because they wanted to help other people, they enjoyed the art and science of dentistry, and they wanted to own a practice and be their own boss. Alternative careers, including academic dentistry, government service, or employment in private industry or foundations, were not even a remote consideration. However, with recent transformational change in the health professions and health care delivery, dentists have the opportunity to define their career paths in new and innovative ways. The panel presentation on “Alternative Careers for Women in Dentistry” at the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) International Women’s Leadership Conference (IWLC) provided an opportunity for three women leaders including myself to describe our career paths and explain how we adapted and forged pathways beyond traditional clinical and academic careers.

Dental education has seen great progress in the advancement of women into top leadership positions in dental schools. Today, about 20% of U.S. dental school deans are women, and about 25% of department chairs are women. But we still have a long way to go to achieve parity by gender and race in both professional opportunities and compensation. And even fewer women have advanced their careers beyond dental academics to leadership positions in health centers, universities, government and military service, foundations, professional associations, and private industry. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in all sectors of higher education and industry is an important issue. When leadership teams are inclusive and represent diverse opinions from varied backgrounds and cultures, better decisions are made. It is unfortunate and potentially harmful when important decisions are made without these voices at the table.

Why do women remain underrepresented in leadership positions? A recent national study in academic medicine concluded that faculty men and women are equally engaged in their work and share similar leadership aspirations. However, the study concluded, medical schools have failed to create and sustain an environment in which women feel fully accepted and supported to succeed. A national survey about work environment perceptions of full-time dental educators reported similar findings. Those authors concluded that female and male faculty members differed in their experiences and perceptions of the academic climate at U.S. dental schools. A more recent 22-year observational study of gender trends in dental leadership and academics concluded that while the percentage of tenured female faculty members and female deans in U.S. dental schools have increased during the study period, females remain a minority in dental academics and leadership.

Similar reports can be found in industry. Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, noted that women face both institutional barriers and barriers within ourselves, sometimes as a result of socialization. In her bestselling book, Sandberg noted, “I have written this book to encourage women to dream big, forge a path through the obstacles, and achieve their full potential. I am hoping each woman will set her own goals and reach for them with gusto. . . . As we start using the talents of our entire population, our institutions will be more productive, our homes will be happier.” She has encouraged both men and women to join in conversation about gender and work and has offered extensive resources on the subject via the “Lean In” website.
Redefining Leadership Opportunities for Women: Three Female Examplars

Mahatma Gandhi encouraged us to “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” The transformational changes in health care delivery provide opportunities to redefine the profession and to create strategies to improve oral health moving forward. The implementation of the Affordable Care Act, changes in dental service utilization patterns, the shift toward value-based payments in both public and private insurance plans, a new wave of health care consumerism, and a growing appreciation of the importance of oral health as a contributor to overall health and well-being are just a few examples of a “new normal” facing the dental profession. The ADEA Deans’ Briefing Book quotes the American Dental Association (ADA) report “A Profession in Transition” as noting: “the trend towards larger, consolidated multi-site practices will continue, driven by changes in practice patterns of new dentists, a drive for efficiency, and increased competition for patients. The pressure to reduce costs will also drive innovation, including exploring alternative care delivery models.” Economic drivers, innovation and new technologies, and changes in health policy provide significant opportunity to craft professional careers in new and exciting ways beyond the traditional model of clinical dental practice. Private industry, as well as academic dental institutions, can serve as development and evaluation grounds for future delivery models. New roles such as chief clinical officers for large group practice organizations will continue to emerge, requiring clinicians with the appropriate expertise, experience, interest, and creativity to serve in these new capacities.

The three IWLC panel presenters described their individual career paths and provided commentary about the challenges facing women seeking leadership roles in dentistry. Each presenter offered suggestions for younger professionals in the process of shaping their careers. Using myself as an example, the first 30 years of my career—six years of postdoctoral training and 24 years as a faculty member and administrator—could be considered fairly traditional. I rose through the academic ranks at the University of Florida (UF) and assumed progressive administrative responsibilities as program director, associate dean, interim dean, and dean prior to retiring from university to pursue a career in industry. During my tenure at UF, I benefitted from opportunities to build my expertise in teaching, research, clinical care, and administrative leadership. I actively volunteered in professional organizations that allowed me to network with colleagues nationally and globally. This experience led to opportunities as a consultant, on advisory committees, and in other national service roles. These cumulative experiences combined with leadership training and mentoring prepared me for my current position as Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer at DENTSPLY International. In this role, I provide strategic direction for global DENTSPLY professional services including clinical education, professional relations, and clinical research, and I actively engage with the various business units to support their unique clinical initiatives and strategies.

Dr. Anousheh Alavi’s career path led her to her current role as Scientific Affairs Manager at Colgate-Palmolive (U.K.) Ltd. She graduated from University College Hospital Dental Institute, University of London, and after four years in general dental practice, she obtained her Fellowship of Royal College of Surgeons (Edinburgh) in Periodontology and Oral Medicine. She carried out research and published papers on periodontal ligament biology. Dr. Alavi has worked for Colgate for more than 15 years, where she focuses on close collaborations with the Department of Health, National Health Service England, Public Health England, Health Education England, and bodies in Scotland and Wales. As a member of the British Society of Periodontology and the British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry, she focuses on the prevention of oral diseases and reducing health inequality. Her responsibilities include devising unique partnerships with key stakeholders in dental public health, from training to implementation of oral health strategies in dental teams, and extending primary dental care beyond clinical settings.

Dr. Kathryn Atchison’s extensive experience in clinical dentistry, dental research, administration, and leadership led her to her current position as Vice Provost of New Collaborative Initiatives at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and professor in the UCLA School of Dentistry and School of Public Health. As Vice Provost, she has the broad responsibility over developing collaborative partnerships for UCLA with private and public entities. Since 2011, she has led a collaboration funded by the
Preparing for Careers in Dynamic Times

Career paths are not linear. The panelists’ personal stories demonstrated that there is no such thing as “perfect career planning” and career advancement often requires flexibility and open-mindedness about possibilities and opportunities. Mary Catherine Bateson, an author and cultural anthropologist, wrote that “many of us mistakenly believe that we can set a 5, 10, and 15 year vision for our lives and follow that predetermined linear path to leadership positions and success.” But the panelists’ experiences, and those of the women featured in Bateson’s book, illustrate that life is really, as she described it, more of an “improvisation, or a beautiful patchwork quilt of experiences, or a symphony with sometimes unique but complementary movements.” Bateson used the lives of five women as her framework, and several of her analogies resonate with me, such as describing life as an improvisational art form. Bateson noted, “This is a study of five artists engaged in the act of creation that engages us all—the composition of our lives. Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursing a vision already defined.” She continued, “Our lives not only take new directions; they are subject to repeated redirections, partly because of the extension of our years of health and productivity. . . . Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment.”

Dr. Atchison emphasized the importance for women to be open to new responsibilities and to be responsive to the needs of an organization. Moving up may require one to be receptive to trying a position that may not have been something you anticipated. In her case, the Executive Vice Chancellor asked if she would consider taking on responsibility for the campus’s Office of Intellectual Property and Industry Relations. It would be reasonable to question how expertise in public health dentistry would translate to an administrative role overseeing intellectual property and industry relations. However, her willingness to learn and grow, be open-minded, and “lean-in” (being willing to step in and act) when the opportunity presented itself provides important insights for others who may face similar unanticipated opportunities.

The importance of “leaning in.” Leaning in provides an important opportunity for skill building, leadership development, and recognition for talents that might otherwise go unnoticed. Academicians gain valuable experience by doing things such as directing courses, chairing search committees or faculty committees, and taking on leadership roles in professional organizations. In addition to skill building, these roles provide greater visibility to others in leadership positions, add value to your organization, and increase the likelihood of career advancement. If you don’t “lean in,” there is a good chance you will miss advancement opportunities or not be in a
position to showcase your talents—both of which are necessary for career advancement.

The value of leadership development programs. Formal leadership development programs support networking and skill development and provide time for reflection. From an organizational perspective, leadership programs such as the Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM) Program for Women and the ADEA Leadership Institute can serve as important vehicles to accelerate cultural change to support a more welcoming organizational culture for women and a more diverse mix of faculty. Leadership programs also help participants look beyond their current reality and consider career paths that may not have previously been considered a possibility.

Both Dr. Atchison and I benefitted from serving as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Dental Health Services Research Scholar. In this very personalized career development opportunity, we were paired with mentors from other health fields to broaden our experience. The program also provided opportunities to network with respected leaders in academic dentistry and health care. While this RWJF program is no longer offered, other well-respected programs are available, including the ADEA Leadership Institute, the ELAM program, and the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) residential professional development program dedicated to advancing women leaders in higher education administration.

The ELAM program is a year-long, part-time fellowship for women faculty in schools of medicine, dentistry, and public health. The purpose of the ELAM fellowship is “to build a community of exceptional women academic leaders who have broad organizational perspectives and deep personal capacity to address emerging issues in their schools and universities and the society they serve.” The ELAM program has been carefully evaluated, and program participants reported large gains in knowledge of leadership and organization theory, environmental scanning, financial management, and general leadership. Gains in career-building knowledge, according to the same study, were large to moderate, and there were more modest gains in communication, networking, and conflict management. Personally, the ELAM program helped me realize that leadership skills transcend a particular discipline or profession and can be applied in a variety of settings. It helped me realize that, in addition to being a dentist and academician, my skills were transferrable to other roles in higher education. This knowledge and confidence encouraged me to consider positions beyond my role at the time as dean, for example.

Career strategies. While a career path may not be linear, it should be strategic. Dorie Clark, in a Harvard Business Review article, suggests that a political campaign is a good model for someone planning a career because the politician has a clear, definitive goal, a set time to accomplish it, and the need to think through the way to get there. Clark’s tenets from the political campaign are to set clear goals, reach out to supporters, build and exercise influence, and then execute relentlessly to achieve your ambition. These tenets are clearly transferrable to a professional career.

Conclusion

Writing this article made me think of the final stanza of one of my favorite poems, Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”: “I shall be telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence;/Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference.” Change in the health professions and health care delivery provides dental professionals the opportunity to define career paths in new and innovative, “less traveled” ways. Dental leaders have transferable skills that can be well suited for non-traditional careers, including leadership positions in higher education, professional organizations, government service, industry, or foundations. The three of us on the IWLC panel described our individual career paths and provided commentary about the challenges facing women seeking leadership roles. Each offered suggestions for younger professionals in the process of shaping their careers. These career vignettes demonstrate the importance of developing expertise and leadership competencies, as well as having a willingness to take chances and accept new and challenging roles, even when concerned about not being “perfectly” prepared for a role.

REFERENCES