Washington’s RIDE Program: A Model Providing Rural Practitioners

Mary K. Smith DDS, MBA
University of Washington School of Dentistry, mks327@uw.edu

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A shortage of dentists and dental team members in rural areas exists not just in Michigan, but in many such areas across the United States. In Washington state, the Regional Initiatives in Dental Education, or RIDE, program at the University of Washington School of Dentistry has been successful in training dentists to practice in rural and underserved areas. This article, by Dr. Mary Krempasky Smith, explains the background, development, and success of this innovative program.

—The Editors

Solving the access-to-care dilemma has been a longstanding struggle in many parts of our country, particularly in underserved areas. Looking at the dentist-to-population ratio in these areas reveals the need. For example, in the state of Washington’s Seattle-King County, there is approximately one dentist for every 948 people. But in Pend Oreille County, along the Washington-Idaho border, it drops to one dentist per 12,300 people. Programs that address those needs and set up young professionals for success are key to addressing this particular access challenge.

To address the issue, efforts need to be made to recruit and retain dental professionals in these areas. While initiatives like loan forgiveness programs, scholarships, and incentives can help to attract dental providers to underserved communities, it’s clear we have to first identify candidates who are interested in practicing in rural and underserved settings in order to achieve lasting change.

How it started

Back in the 1970s, the University of Washington School of Medicine established a program now known widely as WWAMI, short for the five participating states: Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana and Idaho. To address access to medical care in rural and underserved areas, the WWAMI model recruits students who agree to return to their home states and practice in them upon graduation. The Washington School of Medicine learned that there was a huge reciprocal benefit of community goodwill and continuing education that develops from inviting community partners.

Then, in the early 2000s, a small group of dentists in Spokane, Wash., tackled the challenge of developing a program to recruit dental providers to eastern Washington’s rural and underserved areas the same way they had spearheaded a program, expanding oral care to children ages 0 to 5. They knew a solution would require out-of-the-box strategies and a collaborative effort.

At the same time, the University of Washington School of Dentistry (UWSOD) was contemplating how to expand the size of the dental school class size, with limited physical capacity on the main campus in Seattle. Dr. Wendy Mouradian saw an opportunity in applying the success of WWAMI to the dental school.

The Spokane District Dental Society played a key role in the development of the Regional Initiatives in Dental Education, or RIDE, program. In collaboration with the University of Washington School of Dentistry, the Eastern Washington University
Dental Hygiene program, Washington State University, community health organizations, and legislators, the RIDE program was funded by the Washington Legislature in 2007. The first cohort started classes in 2008.

**How it works**

The first step for RIDE-interested applicants is to apply and be accepted into the UWSOD general program. An applicant who indicates their interest in the RIDE track must then complete a supplemental application. The candidate’s application and supplemental application are reviewed by the RIDE admissions committee for acceptance into the RIDE program. Currently, there is a cohort of eight students in the program.

The admissions process focuses on identifying applicants who are interested in rural and underserved locations for several reasons:

- It helps address the health care disparities and access issues that exist in underserved areas. By significantly identifying applicants who are interested in practicing in these locations, it increases the likelihood of dental professionals choosing to work in areas that are in need of their services. This can help improve the availability and quality of health care in these areas, ultimately benefiting the local communities.

- The admissions process helps to create a more diverse and culturally competent dental workforce. By attracting applicants who are interested in rural and underserved locations, it ensures that health care professionals come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. This diversity can enhance their understanding and ability to meet the unique health care needs of these communities, which may have different cultural, social, and economic contexts.

- Furthermore, the admissions process also serves as a way to promote and encourage interest in rural (Continued on Page 44)
Figure 2 — RIDE Program Timetable

| Intro to Clinical Dentistry + 1st Year | In the summer before first year, RIDE students come to Seattle for a week long orientation followed by a six-week Intro to Clinical Dentistry course. This is a great opportunity to explore the Seattle campus connect with the Seattle cohort, meet upper-level RIDE students, and learn the basics of clinical dentistry. Then, RIDE students spend their first year of dental school at the EWU Spokane campus where UWSOD delivers high quality dental education through both in person instruction and distance learning modalities. |
| RUOP | The summer after their first year, RIDE students go on a four-week clinical rotation at an affiliated community health center in central or eastern Washington. |
| 2nd and 3rd Year | Students spend their second and third years of dental school at the UWSOD in Seattle and benefit from our robust clerkship and comprehensive care clinical training models. **NOTE:** The opportunity to spend the second year at the EWU Spokane campus is in progress, pending funding. |
| 4th Year + Extended Rotation | After completing their summer and fall quarters at the UWSOD in Seattle, RIDE students experience an intensive, five-month clinical rotation at an affiliated community health center in central or eastern Washington. |
technology — something RIDE students did long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Students enrolled in RIDE also take general anatomy classes alongside the University of Washington School of Medicine’s WWAMI medical students, and periodontal classes alongside EWU dental hygiene students, thus creating an early interdisciplinary connection. And that’s where the RIDE experience begins to diverge from the traditional UWSOD program.

Sending students into rural areas requires specialized training beyond dentistry.

In the RIDE program, students not only learn the practice of dentistry, but also leadership and community engagement skills necessary to settle and be successful in their communities.

In the RIDE program, students not only learn the practice of dentistry, but also leadership and community engagement skills necessary to settle and be successful in their communities. As part of their first-year curriculum, they attend Dental Action Day at the state capitol in Olympia with dentists from the Washington State Dental Association. There, they are encouraged to participate in the discussions with legislators.

The summer after their first year, the RIDE cohort participates in a four-week rural/underserved opportunities (RUOP) program rotation. (Continued on Page 46)
A RIDE student is pictured in the Eastern Washington University simulation lab in Spokane.

RIDE Program

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They have the opportunity to serve as a dental assistant and administer local anesthetic under two or three dental preceptors at a community health clinic located in central and eastern Washington. While the focus of this program has been in eastern and central Washington, there is need throughout the state. The program hopes to expand into western Washington. The first western Washington clinic was added last spring. It is located in Chehalis, outside Olympia.

This initial immersion into the clinics teaches students about the community. They get to know and understand the needs of the patient population and also the challenges that the dental professionals see.

The students spend their second year, third year, and first term of their fourth year at the Seattle campus. The last five months are spent at their “site.” Whenever possible they return to their RUOP site.

By spending five months in a community health clinic setting, students have the opportunity to provide comprehensive care to a diverse patient population, an experience that is not available to students on shorter rotations. This longer rotation allows them to apply their dental knowledge and skills in a real-world setting, while providing much-needed oral health care to underserved communities. Seeing six to eight patients per day demonstrates the program’s commitment to maximizing their clinical exposure to complex and emergency cases and ensuring that students are well-prepared to handle the unique needs of the patient population, as well as a high patient load in their future practice.

In addition to seeing restorative patients daily, they also provide re-care examinations when needed. This as-
pect of the program emphasizes the importance of continuity of care and encourages students to develop long-term relationships with their patients. It also helps students understand the significance of regular follow-up visits and the impact of preventive care in maintaining oral health.

The program has to be flexible. Not all sites provide the full scope required for graduation. In these cases, RIDE partners with local private-practice dentists. After a calibration course, they become UW affiliate faculty members, allowing them to preceptor the students. For example, the NEW Health clinic in Colville, Washington, predominately serves adults. RIDE partners with a pediatric dentist in the area for two days each month so the students can complete their pediatric clinical requirements.

The inclusion of inter-professional experiences with a pharmacist, physical therapist, nurse practitioners, and medical professionals is another valuable component of the program. Collaborating with professionals from different health care disciplines promotes a holistic approach to patient care and fosters a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of the health care field. This interprofessional exposure enhances (Continued on Page 48)

RIDE program graduates help to maintain a sense of continuity and tradition within the program. The knowledge and values passed down from one generation of dentists to the next ensures that the program’s principles and standards are upheld.

RIDE Class of 2024, currently on clinic rotation and set to graduate in June 2024.

RIDE students practicing local anesthesia administration in the Eastern Washington University simulation lab in Spokane.
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RIDE Program
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communication, teamwork, and the ability to provide comprehensive care to patients.

The program provides students with an excellent opportunity to develop essential skills such as effective communication, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cultural competency. These skills are vital for success in the health care field and can contribute to improved patient outcomes. Additionally, interacting with professionals from other disciplines allow students to expand a professional network and build beneficial relationships that can benefit them in their future careers.

Overall, the program’s emphasis on dental clinic experience, patient education, and inter-professional experiences highlights the importance of comprehensive care, teamwork, and patient-centered approaches. By providing such opportunities, the program aims to prepare young professionals to be competent, compassionate, and well-rounded health care providers.

RIDE program graduates help to maintain a sense of continuity and tradition within the program. The knowledge and values passed down from one generation of dentists to the next ensures that the program’s principles and standards are upheld. This continuity helps preserve the program’s legacy and contributes to its ongoing success. RIDE graduates’ commitment to staying connected and guiding the next generation of dentists reflects their dedication to the profession and the desire to contribute to the growth and success of future dental professionals.

Future plans include an expansion to a cohort of 16 and the first two years of dental school in Spokane.

Conclusions

Developing and implementing programs that address the specific needs of dentists in rural areas is vital for setting young professionals up for success. Here are a few key elements on which such programs should focus:

Comprehensive rural dentistry training. The program should provide young professionals with comprehensive training that covers not only the standard dental curriculum but also specialized skills and knowledge required for rural practice. This can include hands-on experience in treating a wide range of dental conditions.

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About the Author

Mary Krempasky Smith, DDS, MBA, is a faculty member at the University of Washington School of Dentistry, Restorative Department, and clinical director of the RIDE program since 2014. She has served as president of the Washington State Dental Association and the Washington Academy of General Dentistry. She is a fellow in the American College of Dentists, the International College of Dentists, and the Pierre Fauchard Academy. Smith served as the 11th District Trustee to the American Dental Association from 2006-10. She is the recipient of numerous honors, including the Washington State Dental Association President’s Award, the ADA’s Geriatric Oral Care Award, and the Western Hockey League’s Distinguished Service Award.

Smith
tions, management of dental emergencies, and exposure to the unique challenges faced in rural settings.

Mentorship and guidance. Pairing young dentists with experienced mentors who have worked in rural areas can be highly beneficial. Mentors can provide guidance, support, and share their expertise to help young professionals navigate the challenges they may encounter. Regular check-ins, case discussions, and opportunities for shadowing can enhance the learning experience and build confidence.

Financial incentives and loan repayment assistance. Rural dentistry programs can offer financial incentives such as scholarships, grants, or loan repayment assistance to attract and retain young professionals in underserved areas. These incentives can help alleviate the financial burden and make rural practice more enticing for newly graduated dentists.

Networking and collaboration. Creating opportunities for young professionals to connect with peers and establish a network of support is crucial. This can be done through professional organizations, conferences, and online platforms that facilitate collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mentorship among rural dentists.

Continuing education and professional development. Ongoing education and professional development opportunities should be readily available to young professionals in rural areas. This can include workshops, webinars, and conferences that focus on the specific challenges and advancements in rural dentistry. Ensuring access to the latest research, technologies, and best practices will help keep rural dentists up to date and improve the quality of care they provide.

The RIDE program has achieved notable recognition and acclaim for its achievements. It was awarded the 2017 William J. Gies Award for Vision, Innovation, and Achievement for its outstanding contributions to oral health and dental education. The RIDE program has been a leader in the field of teledentistry, receiving a grant from the USDA to help rural residents gain access to health care and educational opportunities.

Furthermore, the RIDE program has demonstrated effectiveness in delivering positive outcomes. It has proven to be successful, achieving its intended goals, improving efficiency of dental students in “real world” settings, increasing productivity for the community clinics, and making a positive impact on individual patients and society as a whole.

The RIDE program’s long-term impact is another reason for its success. By placing dental students in underserved areas, the program not only provides immediate care but also has a lasting impact on these communities. Students often develop strong connections with the community members they serve, and some even choose to establish their practices in these areas after graduation, further improving access to care.

I have been involved with RIDE from the initial conversations to now serving as the UWSOD clinical director of the RIDE program. I was recently asked by a panel of Washington State legislators why it works. My answer: It’s the people. Everyone involved from the beginning was focused on providing solutions for the patients. They were willing to overcome the many obstacles to find solutions that would succeed. I’d like to tell you the road is smooth and straight, but more accurately, it is muddy, full of potholes, and often requires quick fixes. The flexibility of the UW administration, RIDE faculty (on both sides of the mountains), our community partners, and support from our state lawmakers has resulted in an unrivaled program that continues to grow and change to meet the needs of the patients we serve.

Even with the obstacles, it’s a great RIDE.