

## Report to the Executive Director

### Background

The inaugural South Carolina Dental Team Labor Shortage Summit was convened on Friday, May 12, 2023 at the Cooperative Convention Center in Columbia, SC. A growing number of SCDA members had expressed concerns about shortages of dental assistants and hygienists in their practices and those of their peers. As a response to address those needs, SCDA leadership believed it was essential to convene through leaders and dental staff educators to more fully understand the scope of the problem. Mr. Latham and Dr. Comisi reached out to Dr. Amy Martin at the James B. Edwards College of Dental Medicine at MUSC to assist in the planning and facilitation of the Summit.

### Summit Purpose & Goals

The purpose and scope of the Summit was to discuss the degree to which South Carolina is experiencing a shortage of dental hygienists and assistants, and the underlying pipeline (recruitment) and marketplace (retention) forces influencing it. SCDA and MUSC agreed to the following goals

1. To enhance the understanding of the scope and contributors to the perceived shortage of dental hygienists and assistants in South Carolina.
2. To identify opportunities for increasing the recruitment and retention of dental hygienists and dental assistants in the workforce.
3. To discuss potential process(es) and partnerships for addressing hygiene and assistant workforce issues. Examples include but are not limited to:
  - a. (Knowledge) Technical assistance (e.g. private practitioners on retention best practices)
  - b. (Collaboration) Establish workgroup of the SC Oral Health Coalition
  - c. (Activism) Legislative agenda with professional advocacy plan

The resulting agenda (figure, right) provided opportunities to hear directly from faculty at the state's Technical Colleges from both dental assistant and hygiene programs. Panelists provided insights on training pipeline issues, as well as their experiences and perspectives relative to retention in the workforce. We ensured there was representation from both dental assistant and hygiene programs for each of the panels, whose members included:

AGENDA		
9:00 am	Welcome	John Comisi, DMD
9:15 am	Overview of Purpose & Discussions	Amy Martin, DrPH
9:30 am	Part I: Description of the SC Hygiene & Assistant Training Pipeline	Program Directors Panel
10:30 am	Part II: Retention of Hygienists & Assistants in Chairsides Care	Practice Panel
11:30 am	Part IV: Debriefing & Next Steps	Amy Martin, DrPH
12:00 pm	Adjourn	

### *Recruitment/Training Programs Panel*

1. Jennifer Estabrook (Hygiene; Horry Georgetown Tech)
2. Melissa Copeland (Hygiene; Trident Tech)
3. Kim Best (Assisting; Spartanburg)
4. Elaine Evans (Assisting; Midlands Tech)

### *Retention Panel*

1. Dr. Jonna Moreschi (Hygiene, York Tech)
2. Alicia Johnston (Hygiene; Florence Darlington Tech)
3. Mandy Hanks (Assisting; Tricounty Tech)
4. Michelle Ashley (Assisting; Greenville)

### Workforce Statistics

Not published in the agenda but included in the Summit was empirical data shared by Dr. Martin and Katie Gaul, Director for the SC Office of Healthcare Workforce at the SC Area Health Education Consortium. As a component of preparatory work, the Technical Colleges provided data that described student enrollment and program capacities (number of faculty and operatories) from 2019 through 2022 (Appendix A). Blank cells indicate data points for which data was not available. These data provide context for discussion subsequently held.

Data presented by Ms. Gaul summarizes data from state and national workforce data sources. Her slides are available in Appendix B. Limited information was available on dental assistants since they are not licensed in the state of South Carolina. The primary themes germane to the concerns of SCDA members are as follows:

- Federal data from the Health Resources and Services Administration demonstrates an adequate supply of dental hygienists with an excess predicted in the future.
- Salaries for both hygienists and dental assistants have increased considerably in the last several years.
- There has been a steep increase in the number of job openings for both hygienists and dental assistants.

These three data points suggest an adequate supply of workforce (hygienists at least) but a highly competitive market with higher salary expectations than historically experienced.

### **Part I: Description of the SC Hygiene & Assistant Training Pipeline**

The first panel answered three questions related to enrollment management and education of hygiene and assistant students.

For the first question, five themes were identified: two in hygiene education and three for dental assistant programs.

1. "Tell us the operational considerations that go into establishing the number of students (hygiene or assistant) admitted each year into your programs, for example faculty supervision, chair availability, etc."  
(Probe) What are the accreditation drivers that impact class sizes for your hygiene and assistant programs?

Responses on next page.

### Hygiene Program Responses:

#### Theme #1.1: ENROLLMENT DRIVERS

Enrollment is driven by 3 primary factors:

- CODA approved enrollment numbers
- Capacity (space, chairs, etc.)
- Number of faculty
- One program wishes to expand student enrollment from 24 to 30 students but is short on faculty

#### Theme #1.2: FACULTY RECRUITMENT

- Recruiting faculty is especially difficult since RDHs make greater incomes in care delivery, compared to academics.

- Recruitment of faculty is expected to become even more difficult with the newly adopted guidelines, which require full and part time faculty to have a baccalaureate (or higher) degree.
- Faculty salary improvements are difficult because of compensation rules in state agencies (Technical Colleges are state agencies).

Assistant Program Responses:

Theme #1.3: CODA/Accreditation Standards

- DAs must have a 6:1 ratio in clinic, 12:1 in lab, & 4 faculty based on approved enrollment numbers.
  - As an example, the program must have 18 chairs to serve 20 freshman DH, 20 senior DH, and 20 DA students (60 students)
- Faculty to have at least an associate degree to work in the clinic but DAs graduate with a diploma

Theme #1.4: Faculty Recruitment for DA Program

- There are not enough credit hours to teach to offer full-time equivalent employment
- To teach a lecture course for a DA program, faculty must be a CDA and have a bachelor's degree but no one is paying for extra degrees because it doesn't matter for employment so our pool is slim.
- One program reported challenges with recruiting a supervising dentist

Theme #1.5: Clinic & Facility Capacity

- If chairs are not working properly, which can be common for some programs, rotations are compromised. One program had to decrease enrollment due to limitations on dental material lab space.

The second question specifically explored applications to both program types.

2. Describe application trends for your hygiene and assisting programs.
  - a. (Probe) How have numbers of applications to your programs changed? Have you seen increases or decreases? What typically happens to applicants who are not accepted – do you follow-up with them?

Hygiene Program Response:

Hygiene programs all reported robust numbers of applications to their programs (see Appendix A). Their programs' responses to the question demonstrated how the application practices vary across all Technical Colleges:

Theme #2.1: APPLICATION PRACTICES:

- Rolling vs. non-rolling application process (latter means applicant was reapply each year)
- Weighted vs. un-weighted criteria
- Waitlist vs. 'first come, first serve as prerequisite courses are met

Assistant Program Response:

Variation of application protocols also varied for dental assistant programs. One program

reported abandoning a waitlist system in favor of a “pathway transition” points system for entry. This resulted in an increase in more qualified applicants to the program. Other considerations that influenced both quality and number of applicants included:

- Theme #2.2: DA TO RDH: Many DA students wishing to continue in the RDH program, thus reducing the number of DAs entering the workforce. These students were also less likely to be hired as a DA due to retention concerns of employment by dental practices.
- Theme #2.3: FREE TUITION IMPACT – Many Technical Colleges began offering free tuition for many of its programs as a result of COVID. It has not had the desired effect for programs. Many students apply who maybe otherwise not have considered dental professions. Once they realize the cost of supplies, they drop out. This has impacted graduation rates for many programs.
- Theme #2.4: LOST INTEREST: A better understanding of what the job requirements are and the salary contributes to the attrition of students once accepted.

The third question asked panelists to explore considerations that would factor into future, but hypothetical, program expansions.

3. “If your training programs were to expand, what (and how much/many) resources would be needed to support your growth?”
  - a. (Probe) How many new faculty FTEs, new operatories, etc. would you need to increase your program by 20% as an example?
  - b. How could community partnerships support training expansion, if at all?

#### Hygiene Program Responses:

Theme #3.1: SPACE – Expansion of facilities would be required and that is especially costly.

Theme #3.2: FACULTY – Additional faculty would need to be recruited. There was concern because of existing challenges with faculty recruitment for current class sizes.

Theme #3.3: ACCREDITATION – Space and faculty to accommodate the program expansions would need to be in place prior to CODA approval of any expansion. This means costs would need to be incurred before enrollment numbers would be approved.

Theme #3.4: WORKFORCE NUMBERS – It is unclear what the right number of enrollment numbers are but programs need to consider the impact of expanding too much and flooding the market with hygienists (for whom there may not be enough jobs).

Theme #3.5: APPLICANT POOL – Concerns were expressed that growing the applicant pool of qualified candidates could be challenging in order to meet program expansion goals. The suggestion was made that programs need better relationships with high schools to develop better pipelines. It was acknowledged that SCDA offers scholarships which is helpful. Unfortunately, programs lose students once they realize what is expected of them both academically and professionally.

Theme #3.6: COMMUNITY-BASED ROTATION PARTNERSHIP CONSIDERATIONS – CODA requires faculty on-site whenever credit is being earned, including off-campus locations. Using off-campus sites would require large spaces, credentialing, and calibration.

#### Assistant Program Responses:

Panelists concurred with faculty and space considerations mentioned above. They offered the

following additional insights:

Theme #3.7: SIMULATION CENTER – As with hygiene programs, additional space would be necessary. One program stated additional funding for a simulation center could aid in expansion.

Theme #3.8: APPLICATION FLUCTUATION – There can be fluctuations in applications to DA programs, making it difficult to predict and hire the appropriate number of faculty.

Theme #3.9: STUDENT BUDGETS - One program reported its students are not purchasing supplies, instruments, or typodonts on time due to costs. A second described changes to the way financial aid is managed at their program. Students are required to pay for a “supply kit” from the bookstore instead of getting financial aid refund checks. This has affected how students view the affordability of a DA program.

Theme #3.10: OFF-CAMPUS STUDENT ROTATIONS – DA students are required to spend their last summer completing rotations in general and all specialty practices. Finding partnerships with offices participating in student rotations can be challenging.

### **Part II: Retention of Hygienists & Assistants in Clinical Care**

The second panel addressed their own experiences and those of their alumni with how they select places of employment and why they might change careers or practices. Question one asked about where their alumni go to work upon graduation.

1. Describe the career progressions of your alumni or those in your employment.
  - a. (Probe) In what settings do your graduates work?
  - b. (Probe) How long do they usually stay in those roles? What’s the average length of time spent doing clinical care full-time?

#### **Hygiene Program Responses:**

Theme #4.1: TARGETED RECRUITMENT – One program reported that its weighted entry gives more points to local applications in hopes of keeping them working in local practices. The recent two years of data demonstrated more of their graduates choosing to work in education.

Theme #4.2: CAREER COACHING – Two programs described how it trains students on how to interview for a hygiene job and encourages them to stay in a practice for at least two years before considering another practice.

Theme #4.3 – OUT-OF-STATE COMPETITION – Programs close to the North Carolina border reported that practices in that state tend to pay higher, driving workforce away from South Carolina.

Theme #4.4 – RETENTION TRENDS – It was the assessment of the panelists that the majority of alumni go into private practice and remain there for approximately 10 years.

#### **Assistant Program Responses:**

Theme #4.5 – PROFESSION RETENTION – Programs reported that DAs tend to stay close to where they were trained and remain in the profession (rather than going into hygiene). Some do go onto become laboratory technicians. If they leave the profession, it is for higher paying jobs in other industries (real estate was offered as one example). One panelist stated it is difficult to live on \$17 an hour with no benefits.

The second question explored why their alumni might leave clinical care settings.

2. “What are the primary reasons hygienists and assistants leave clinical care?”
  - a. (Probe) Are they leaving the profession altogether or using their skills in other roles that don’t require clinical care delivery?

Hygiene Program Responses:

Theme #5.1 – STAFF-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS – The panelists suggested that jobs in corporate and DSO practices are offering higher salaries and benefits making it difficult for independent private practices to compete for staff on salary alone. One way to compete with that is to offer a work environment that promotes work/life balance. Many hygienists (and assistants) are mothers who are also primary caregivers to family. When someone in the home is sick, it falls to them to stay home and provide care. Vacation and sick leave are important considerations when choosing a job, but more than that, showing compassion (rather than frustration) when staff has to be out means a lot. Finally, it was stated how negative first-job experiences (which are common) turn RDHs off of the career as a whole.

Theme #5.2 – OTHER OPPORTUNITIES – Panelists described how COVID shifted the workforce with many hygienists and assistants discovering they can work other jobs from home.

Assistant Program Responses:

Theme #5.3 – LIVABLE WAGES – A discussion was held on the comparison of what assistants make to jobs in the service industry (e.g. fast food restaurants). To retain the workforce, income should reflect value. The question was asked that if patient care is valued more than serving food, shouldn’t income reflect that.

Theme #5.4 – DENTAL LEADERSHIP – It was offered that as a program requirement, DAs rotate through dental offices. Word spreads quickly about practice atmosphere, perpetuating reputations about dentists and their staff. Dentists who are good leaders and teachers are better at retaining staff. Feedback and evaluation that is given for improvement purposes (not reprimanding) is valued. Showing appreciation and praise is essential.

The third and final question asked about external forces that are influencing the job markets for hygienists and assistants.

3. “What are the marketplace or environmental factors that drive job changes or career changes among hygienists and assistants?”
  1. (Probe) How has the changing DSO environment impacted retention of hygienists and assistants?
  2. (Probe) How did COVID impact career plans for hygienists and assistants?
  3. (Probe) How have salary and benefit demands changed over time?

Hygiene Program Responses:

Theme #6.1 – DSO COMPETITION - Programs shared how DSOs are constantly requesting access to their campuses to meet students, offering dinner cruises and money to training programs simply for the opportunity to meet students. Once hired, it is perceived that DSOs offer more flexibility in work schedules, higher pay, opportunities for advancement, and benefits. Students, however have expressed concerns about the work environments. Below are a few quoted concerns:

- Students feel they are “selling their soul”
- No chairside education
- Rapid fire environment
- Work hard
- “selling” dentistry

Theme #6.2 – UNCERTAINTY OF LOCAL MARKET SALARIES – It can be difficult to know salaries for local market areas making it difficult for potential staff to make decisions about places of employment. There was limited discussion but questions about how or if North Carolina capped hygiene salaries.

Assistant Program Responses:

Theme #6.3 – LIMITED NEED FOR RECRUITMENT – Panelists reported that their assistant graduates get hired quickly, with minimal searching efforts. One program held a job fair to which 14 offices signed up. Most students are hired from a rotation or word of mouth.

Theme #6.4 – DSO GROWTH – Panelists reported similar experiences with DSOs. It can be difficult to know if a practice is a DSO or privately owned.

Theme #6.5 – DENTIST KNOWLEDGE – One program expressed concerns that some dentists are not clear about the practice act limitations of an assistant. One panelist expressed the desire for assistant representation on the state board.

Theme #6.6 – COMPETING PROFESSIONS – As previously mentioned, a panelist shared how they have DA graduates who are also Certified Nursing Assistants. These professionals can usually make more with the CNA credentials.

**Audience Participation**

An open discussion was held amongst the audience who offered important insights to the panel discussions. They are summarized here:

1. Practice Bonus Systems

- DAs should be included in office bonus systems
- Dr. Papadea says they have a whole office productivity goal and all staff get bonuses if met

2. Staff Retention Experiences

- Someone reported he had the same DA for 17 years by offering recognition, CE credits, and other perks. He encouraged dentists to have a professional development plan for staff.

3. Contractual or Temporary Work

- It was stated that many RDHs in the Greenville area are seeking temporary or traveling work assignments to increase personal life flexibility.

4. Professional Considerations for DAs

- A dentist stated DAs aren't typically considered “productive” and this needs to be reassessed, reporting he can't work very well without one. DDS students need to be better trained on utilizing DAs as a valuable team member.

- Development of DA as a profession should be cultivated. There is currently no differentiation of on-job training versus academic training. North Carolina has a DA-I (on-job training) and DA-II (education comes with better pay).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS**

TA could be helpful for practices on how to be attractive employers  
Training Programs need partnerships and to keep up with the marketplace with better surveillance of the environment  
Benefit design is important

### **Recommendations**

Workforce Retention Technical Assistance – There may be value for the SCDA to coordinate or provide coaching services to its members on retention efforts for their practices. Examples include but not limited to:

- Peer coaching from member practices on what they do to successfully retain staff;
- 'Boot camps' for newer members on how to recruit and retain staff.
- Synthesis study on successful bonus systems (as an example).

Continued Engagement with Technical Colleges – The Summit was a great forum to cultivate new and expanded relationships between educators and the SCDA. Continuing the dialogue, specifically for facilitating practice partnerships for rotations, job fairs, and other education-related activities could be explored.

Advocacy for Training Programs - SCDA and the Technical Colleges could continue dialogue on the state of training programs in the state, with a focus on identifying advocacy needs for ensuring a well-trained workforce.

Updated Workforce Surveillance – AHEC is currently working to update its analyses on hygiene workforce data. SCDA could also provide leadership in facilitating the collection of local workforce data for unlicensed professions, compensation models, local market salaries, and prevalence of DSOs in market areas.



Appendix A  
 Student Enrollment, Faculty & Operatory Data by Training Program and Technical College  
 (2019 through 2022)

Tech School	Number of CODA-approved assistant students per cohort				Number of assistant students graduated				Number of Assistant Applicants				Number of operatories/chairs				Nu
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Aiken																	
Florence-Darlington	12	12	18	12	9	11	18	10				17	15	15	15	15	
Greenville	25	16	28	28	25	24	16	27	37	55	41	58	8	8	8	8	
Horry-Georgetown	20	20	20	20	14	16	16	19	30	32	46	29	21	21	21	21	
Midlands																	
Trident	22	0	20	19	18	15	0	13	43	43	45	62	18	18	18	18	
Tricounty	24	24	24	24	21	18	20	18	37	32	35	37	6	6	6	6	
York	20	20	20	20	18	14	15	16	31	18	26	20	20	20	20	20	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>	

Tech School	Number of CODA-approved hygiene students per cohort				Number of hygiene students graduated				Number of Hygiene Applicants				Number of operatories/chairs				Nu
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Florence-Darlington	15	15	15	15	12	14	13	8				65	15	15	15	15	
Greenville	30	20	24	20	29	24	23	19	58	79	72	83	33	33	33	33	
Horry-Georgetown	20	20	20	20	18	20	18	18	52	45	55	51	21	21	21	21	
Midlands	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20					18	18	18	18	
Trident	24	24	24	24	20	17	20	19	146	164	179	191	18	18	18	18	
Tricounty	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
York	20	20	20	20	2	13	15	17	47	45	41	44	20	20	20	20	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>434</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>125</b>	