

How pipeline programs can increase diversity in dentistry

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2018 graduates of NYU College of Dentistry's Saturday Academy. Credit: NYU College of Dentistry

The field of dentistry has a diversity problem. Despite calls for a more diverse workforce, only 15.2 percent of dental school applicants in 2016 were underrepresented minorities, according to the American Dental Education Association.

Having more dentists from diverse backgrounds benefits both patients and peers. Dentists who are underrepresented minorities are more likely to serve communities in need and therefore address disparities in [dental care](#). Studies have also found that a diverse learning environment improves the learning experience for all students through exposure to different ideas and perspectives.

But building the pipeline for more diverse dentists starts well before students apply to dental [school](#). Early exposure to the field is essential, as students need to take science courses in [college](#) that can put them on the path to applying to dental school—making high school an ideal time to engage future dentists.

In 2012, two students at NYU College of Dentistry—who are now both full-time faculty members—set out to create a pipeline program for underrepresented and low-income high school students to boost their interest in health professions, including dentistry. The program is called Saturday Academy, and a new paper describing a pilot study of the program, published in the September issue of the *Journal of Dental Education*, shows that their efforts are working.

"The results of our pilot study suggest that Saturday Academy is a successful example of a pipeline program to increase the future representation of underrepresented minorities in the dental profession by addressing barriers to pursuing a career in the health professions," said Lorel Burns, DDS, who co-founded Saturday Academy as a dental [student](#) and is currently an assistant professor of endodontics at NYU College of Dentistry.

Spending Saturdays at NYU College of Dentistry

NYU College of Dentistry has hosted Saturday Academy each fall since 2013, with students gathering at NYU two Saturdays a month. High

school students are recruited to apply from schools across New York City; the majority of participants are in their junior year.

The purpose of Saturday Academy is twofold: to mentor and coach underrepresented minority and low-income high school students through the college application process and to expose them to the field of dentistry as a viable career option through both instruction and hands-on learning. Dental students volunteer each year to lead the program, enabling participants to build relationships with the next generation of dentists.



In the hands-on labs, students learn how to take impressions of teeth, use stone models made with impressions to create mouthguards and wax-ups, and remove plaque and fill cavities on plastic models of teeth. Credit: NYU College of Dentistry

Each session is split into learning about one facet of college preparedness and a hands-on activity about dentistry. College preparedness topics include the SAT and ACT, Common Application, personal statements, and financial aid. Parents are encouraged to attend the session on financial aid.

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"While we aimed to create a program that was both informative and engaging for high school students, we also made an effort to address perceived barriers to [dental school](#) that influence the dentistry pipeline, including financial resources, family engagement, and mentoring," said Cheryline Pezzullo, DDS, who co-founded Saturday Academy as a student and is currently a clinical instructor of cariology and comprehensive care at NYU College of Dentistry.

The program's impact

The Saturday Academy founders and faculty advisors have surveyed each cohort of participants after completion of the program to measure its success. In the *Journal of Dental Education*, Burns, Pezzullo, and Eugenia E. Mejia, Ph.D., assistant dean for admissions and enrollment management at NYU College of Dentistry, report on their findings from the first five years of Saturday Academy (2013-2017).

Fifty-five of the more than 80 students who have completed Saturday Academy completed surveys about the program. All respondents reported graduating from high school and were attending college, with 93 percent enrolled in four-year colleges or universities and 7 percent in community college.

When asked if they were interested in the health professions, 71 percent said yes, and 47 percent wanted to pursue dentistry as a career. Nearly all (96 percent) of those wanting to become dentists attributed their interest to their experience at Saturday Academy.

"The results of this pilot study show that Saturday Academy has been effective in reaching underrepresented minority and low-income [high school students](#) to achieve its mission: increased understanding of the college application process and increased interest in the health professions, particularly [dentistry](#), among participants," said Eugenia Mejia, Ph.D., assistant dean for admissions and enrollment management at NYU College of Dentistry.

NYU College of Dentistry, which provides funding for Saturday Academy, is expanding the program to reach more [high school](#) students. The Fall 2019 cohort includes 45 students—nearly triple the average number of students in the first five years of the program (17).

More information: *Journal of Dental Education* (2019). [DOI: 10.21815/JDE.019.098](https://doi.org/10.21815/JDE.019.098)

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