

1st Dentist

I have been spending some time thinking about what barriers I encountered while deciding on dentistry as a career. I was interested in dentistry from the start but could not afford dental school. Fortunately, I was the recipient of the Patricia Roberts Harris Fellowship. Had it not been for this fellowship I would not be a dentist today.

My story is not an uncommon one: My parents both had minimal education. My father completed up to third grade and my mom was a high school graduate. I was always encouraged to do well in public school...to take advantage of the opportunity given to me. I was also strongly encouraged to work hard in our family run restaurant and was taught a strong work ethic. My parents felt that this was the most probable source of my livelihood after graduation from high school. I was neither encouraged nor discouraged from attending college. If I wanted to go fine, but I would have to pay my own way. There was no savings or extra money for college.

Undergrad is the most stressful time. Fears build up...what if I don't get in to dental or hygiene school and I have loans, then what? Maybe I should scrap this idea now? Undergrad proved to be toughest for me. It hurt my pride to have found myself on food stamps just to survive (of which I never had the heart to tell my parents). Parents who find it difficult enough to provide for their families cannot see how they can encourage their children to go into such debt for education. Other alternatives are sought: employment after high school or trade schools. Food stamps are one of the things that prevented me from dropping out. Had I told my parents, their advice would have been to quit school and get a job or come home to the family business. When you are starving just to attend undergrad, the idea of attending dental school seems out of the question. Many minorities can't imagine the idea of a \$150,000 home much less paying that much for a 4 year education! When faced with the cost of undergrad and dental school it can seem impossible.

So, in retrospect the barriers were twofold: financial and lack of support from people who I loved and trusted when the going got tough. It is hard for the people who love you most but who have never seen a large sum of money successfully invested in an intangible such as education be supportive. All of their experience tells them that the alternatives are better...get a job now...take care of yourself now...go to trade school.

After reflecting, I have two suggestions. I would recommend some link to a website that shows students and their parents how to finance such an education. Somehow to allay the fears of financial burden and let them know what programs are available including social services. Until minorities develop a history of family members who have successfully invested in an intangible such as education I think a mentoring program would be most helpful. Once the people you love and trust (aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents) have been successful the chances of your success goes up.

Secondly, to provide long term mentors who could provide the support that was lacking in my undergrad years. People who could really get to know the students on a personal level so that when the going gets tough...and we all know it does...there is someone there to steer them from the alternatives of dropping out or choosing another career.

I hope this is helpful!

2nd Dentist

It is amazing growing up in a rural reservation setting and know that the greatest fear was of success, not of failure, because failure was a known reality. It takes an amazing effort to leave that familiar setting and pursue your dreams when everything seems to work against you to pull you back. It is a far reach to see how you can exceed your circumstances, and as a Native American male you really do leave a lot behind to pursue you goals. You don't lose your identity and values, but you do lose your place in the world and that is hard to accept and to overcome.

Education and accomplishment may be your blessing, or your curse, depending on where you come from and where you want to go. With so many different tribes, each with its own distinct history, culture and values, it makes it hard to make generalized recommendations on how to reach this population and make significant gains in our profession. But an effort and creative process certainly is needed.