

# Find the Right Fit:

10 Tips for Choosing the Best  
Dental School for You

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While there are many publications that rank dental schools, they are often inaccurate—there is no level playing field to rank one against another since they all have programmatic and mission-based differences. This is why it is so important to determine what you are looking to get from your dental education and how you want it to be structured.

There are many factors to consider when deciding which schools to apply to. Use these ten tips to help nail down which dental school would be the right fit for you.

### 1. Do some soul searching.

Be sure you do some soul searching and really know what you hope your education will provide. What is motivating you to go to dental school? Think deeply about what excites you and compels you to a career in dentistry, and make sure you come back to that purpose as you research each dental school. This is a good starting place, as dental schools will ask why you decided to pursue a career in dentistry during the application and interview process.

### 2. Consider your location preferences.

Many people forget that wherever they attend dental school, they will also be calling home for the next four years. Consider the geographic location of the school and not just the school itself. If cold weather bothers you and you prefer living in a rural area, for example, think about attending a small school in the South. When researching school locations, explore what the location has to offer in the learning sense. Will the area be able to enrich your understanding of practicing in a rural versus urban environment or underserved community? Does the area provide numerous opportunities for community service to fulfill your interests while in school? Choosing a school based on its name and reputation does not mean its location is the best place for you to spend your next four years.

### 3. Decide what type of curriculum you are looking for.

The dental school curriculum varies by school and often changes. Consider your learning style. Do you prefer lecture or interactive group work? Is it essential to you that service learning be a component of the curriculum? Are you interested in problem-based learning, where you work with small groups to study a particular subject by creating a problem based on that topic? Is having cutting-edge technology in the classrooms important to you? What about your future career plans—do you want to focus more on clinical practice or are you going to pursue a research path? These are important questions to ask yourself in the beginning of the process, when you are researching dental schools. These questions will help you narrow down your search so you apply to schools that truly fit your interests and learning style.

#### 4. Take a look at graduate statistics.

If you have an idea of what you want to do after dental school, then it is important to do some research and find out what graduates of each school you are considering do with their careers. If you are interested in specializing, check with the school to find out how many of their graduates were accepted into a specialty program. This determination can help you decide if your interests are represented at that school. Similarly, if you are looking to get involved in a dental service organization, pay attention to which schools the employees for companies you are interested in came from and consider attending those schools. This applies to all of your other career options after dental school, including going into private practice, academic dentistry, dental research, service in the federal government and public health care policy.

#### 5. Evaluate your fit with the student body.

There is a lot to consider when evaluating your fit with the student body at a school. Class size, for example, could have a big impact on your learning. If you learn better in small groups, it makes sense to look for a school with a small class size and intimate learning environment. If you thrive in a large network of peers, a larger class size would be stimulating for you. Demographics are also important, especially if you are thinking about dentistry and dental care on a larger scale than just the neighborhood you came from and the people you grew up with. Going to a diverse school in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, culture and nationality has the potential to infuse your education with another level of learning and understanding. You can find information on the demographics and class size at each dental school in the *ADEA Official Guide to Dental Schools* and on individual dental school websites.

#### 6. Make sure the school mission aligns with your beliefs.

Many schools closely follow their missions when choosing which applicants they will accept. For example, students interested in working in a rural area after graduation should look for schools that have this focus in their mission. Mission statements describe the values of each institution when it comes to the kinds of patients they serve, the dentists they graduate and the practices they follow. When considering a school's mission, try to tie the key points of the statement back to your values. If you can't relate to the mission on a personal level, chances are the school isn't the right fit for you.

#### 7. Think about the age of the school.

In recent years, several new dental schools have opened. Is it important to you to attend a school that recently opened or one with a more established history? At many new schools, you will have the opportunity to give feedback about the curriculum on a more regular basis and have influence on any curriculum changes. At older schools, you have the benefit of connecting with a larger alumni and evaluating graduate data on a larger scale. Remember, the age of a school does not mean it will be good or bad, but depending on how you want your education to progress, you want to decide now if you are looking at newer or older schools. Just because a school is new does not mean your education will have less value than a more established school. All dental schools will provide you with a quality education.



## 8. Find out what support systems are in place.

Students sometimes encounter challenges in their educational careers. These could include personal, academic, financial or health challenges, to name a few. As you are researching, you want to keep this idea in mind. Some key support systems you might look for are a student health center, academic counseling, psychological counseling, mentoring, structured study groups and professional career development programs. Also, if you are a student with a learning disability, be sure to see what policies and systems they have in place to address any learning needs you may have.

## 9. Recognize that your experience is not limited to class time.

Everyone needs a mental break every once and a while, but you want to do something fulfilling with the time you take for yourself. The need for relaxation doesn't stop in dental school. When looking at a specific school, consider what you would do outside of class and dental school activities. What student organizations or intramural sports are available? What recreational activities does the community offer and how accessible are other recreational events? This is an instance where a school affiliated with a larger university system will have a lot more to offer than schools that stand alone, but maybe you are looking to be surrounded only by others pursuing health professions, in which case a school not associated with a university would be for you.

## 10. Consider what opportunities are available.

Dental school is a prime time to develop your professional skills outside of the actual practice of dentistry. Take a look at what leadership, communication and internship opportunities might be available with various schools. For example, there could be an opportunity for you to get involved in advocacy efforts, mentorship of pre-dental students or with a membership organization like ADEA or ASDA.

**Making the decision to attend dental school is not an easy one, and not everyone who makes this decision will follow through. You are choosing a career that has many opportunities for you and will allow you to grow as an individual in unexpected and rewarding ways. As you are preparing to apply and enter dental school, use the above tips to help you choose the school that best fits your personality, needs and interests. Remember, you will be in dental school for four years, so it is important to spend time finding the best fit for you.**

**Get more information about pursuing a career in dentistry or dental hygiene by visiting our website at [adea.org/GoDental](http://adea.org/GoDental).**



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