



SUMMARY REPORT

ADEA Education Research Series
Issue 1, March 2021

Dentists of Tomorrow 2020

An Analysis of the Results From
the 2020 ADEA Survey of U.S.
Dental School Seniors

T HIS REPORT SUMMARIZES THE KEY FINDINGS of the *Journal of Dental Education* article “Dentists of Tomorrow 2020,” an analysis of the results of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Survey of Dental School Seniors, Class of 2020 (henceforth called “the ADEA 2020 survey”).

This study examines the journey of U.S. dental schools’ predoctoral senior class of 2020, from influences on and their motivations to pursue careers in dentistry, aspects of their dental school experiences, to plans upon graduation and the investment in their careers. Whenever feasible, the answers of the 2020 survey respondents were compared with their 2015 counterparts. Further, this research attempts to better understand the journey of the historically underrepresented and marginalized (HURM) predoctoral senior students by comparing the responses of the overall response sample with the responses of the HURM students.

For the full analysis and methodology, visit the *Journal of Dental Education*. To access the aggregate data resulting from this analysis, visit the [ADEA Senior Student Dashboard](#)

KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY INCLUDE:

- 1 More senior students responding to the ADEA 2020 survey decided to go into dentistry before college than while in college.
- 2 The respondents to the 2020 ADEA survey indicated a high level of readiness to go into the profession.
- 3 The COVID-19 pandemic did not change the professional plans of most 2020 ADEA survey respondents.
- 4 Senior predoctoral students responding to the ADEA survey increasingly planned to attend advanced dental education programs upon graduation in 2020.
- 5 Grants and scholarships were a larger source of funding for dental doctoral degrees in 2020 than five years ago.

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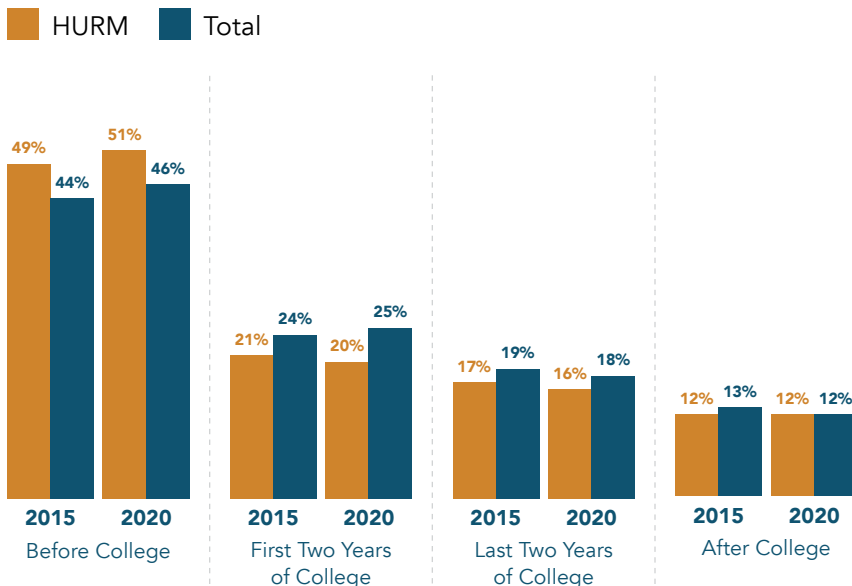
51% OF HURM RESPONDENTS DECIDED TO BECOME A DENTIST BEFORE GOING TO COLLEGE.

1 MORE SENIOR STUDENTS DECIDED TO GO INTO DENTISTRY BEFORE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE THAN WHILE IN COLLEGE.

Almost half of the 2020 respondents (46%) decided to become a dentist before going to college (Figure 1). During college was decision time for a future career in dentistry for 42% of respondents, with the peak of decision-making in the first two years of college. The majority (51%) of HURM respondents to the ADEA 2020 survey indicated they decided to pursue a career in dentistry before college, a higher percentage than the overall response group.

Location was the most frequently cited selection criterion for attending the dental school from which the respondents were graduating in 2020. Either being close to family and friends (42%) or in a place with good weather, good transit, and cultural/recreational opportunities (30%), dental school location featured prominently among the top three reasons for choosing a specific institution. For HURM respondents, recruitment efforts, such as participation in summer/post-baccalaureate educational programs, mattered much more for following a career into dentistry.

FIGURE 1 Timing of Decision to Pursue a Career in Dentistry, Total and HURM Percent of Respondents, 2015 and 2020



Notes: The number of respondents to this question is 2,495 total and 301 for HURM students in 2020, and 4,643 total and 544 for HURM students in 2015. Historically underrepresented and marginalized (HURM) students include the following four race and ethnicity categories: African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. These four race and ethnicity categories are defined by the U.S. Department of Education for reporting data from higher education institutions.

Sources: 2015 and 2020 American Dental Education Association (ADEA) U.S. Surveys of Dental School Seniors. Access the aggregate data through the ADEA Senior Student Dashboard at adea.org/Seniors2020

92% OF
RESPONDENTS
AGREED AND
STRONGLY
AGREED
WITH THE
PREPAREDNESS
TO PRACTICE
STATEMENTS
IN THE ADEA
2020 SURVEY.

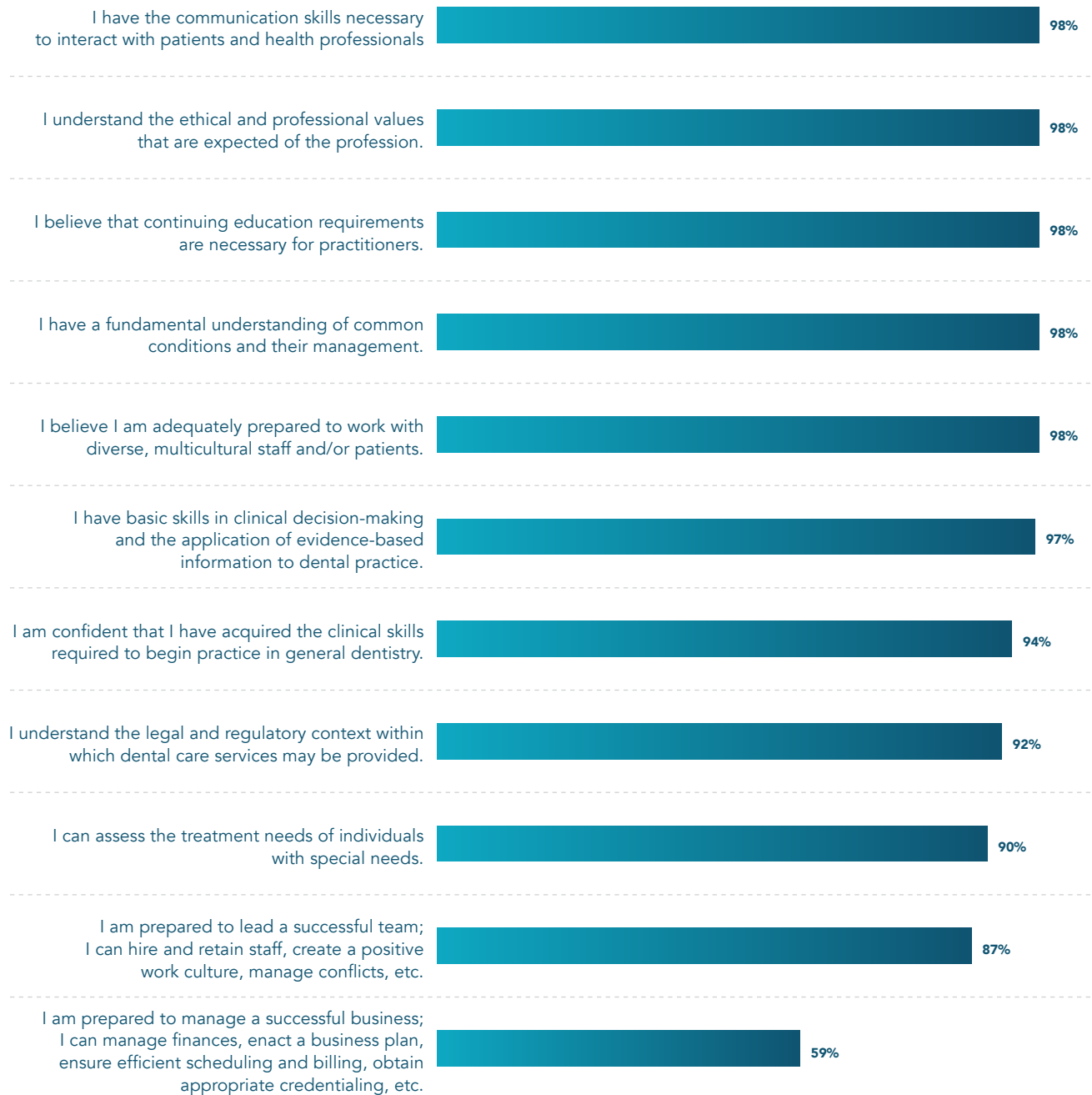
2 THE RESPONDENTS TO THE 2020 ADEA SURVEY INDICATED A HIGH LEVEL OF READINESS TO GO INTO THE PROFESSION.

The ADEA 2020 survey asked participants to estimate the adequacy of clinical experience gained across 14 different areas of education. For 13 of the 14 categories, the majority of respondents reported receiving appropriate/excessive levels of clinical experience during dental school (visit the [ADEA Senior Student Dashboard](#) for the full list and data). Direct restorations, extraction, and geriatric dentistry were the top three clinical areas in terms of percentage of survey respondents indicating they had acquired an adequate level of clinical experience.

Most of the senior students responding to the ADEA 2020 survey stated high levels of confidence in their skills across the 15 clinical areas mentioned in the survey (visit the [ADEA Senior Student Dashboard](#) for the full list and data). On average, 83% of survey respondents were moderately or highly confident in their abilities gained across the 15 clinical areas included in the survey. The 2020 ADEA survey asked respondents' level of agreement to 11 different statements that reflected a variety of abilities needed to enter dental practice. On average, 92% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the preparedness to practice statements in the survey (Figure 2).

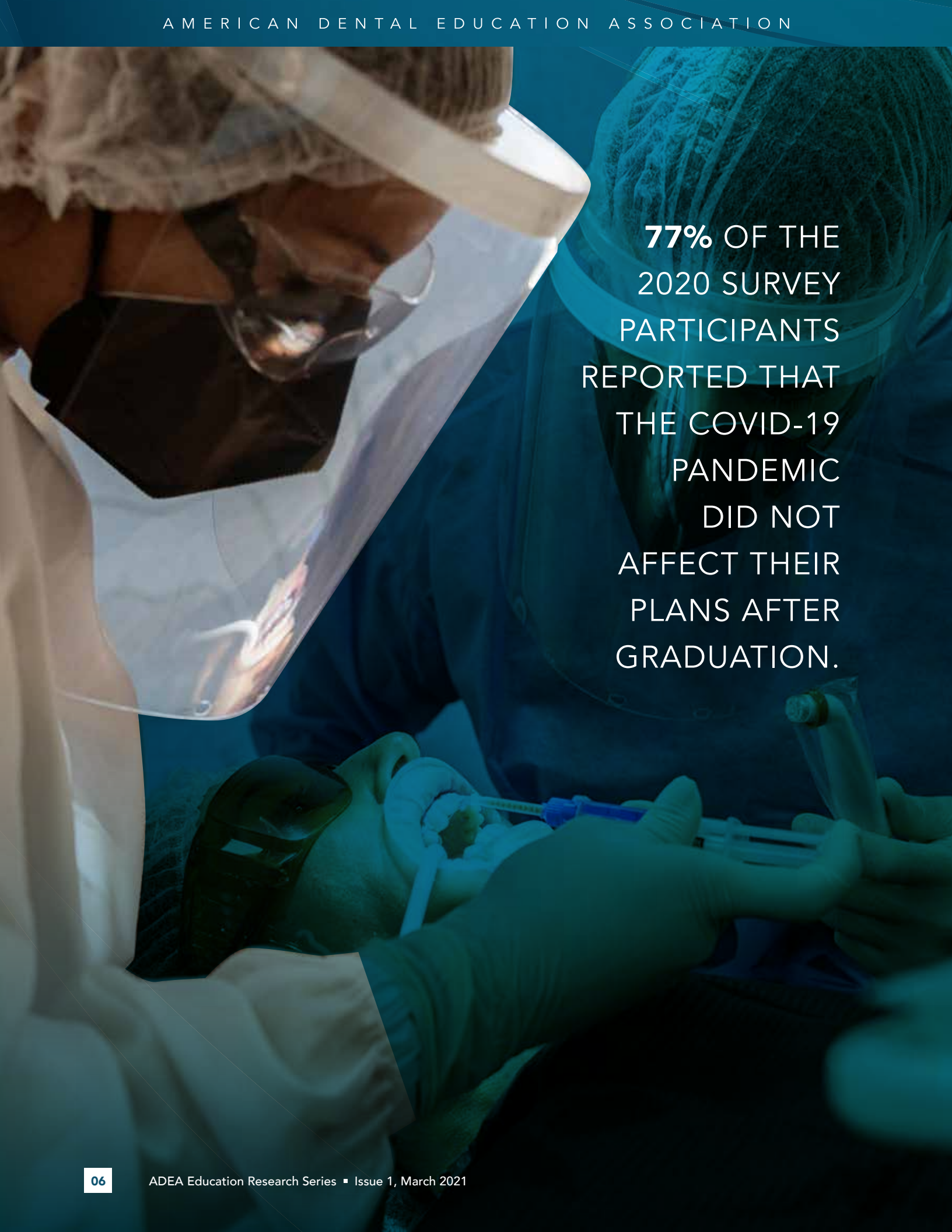
FIGURE 2

Preparedness to Practice, Percent of Respondents Expressing Agreement With Statements Reflecting Preparedness to Practice, 2020



Notes: The total number of respondents to this question varied between 2,469 and 2,475, depending on the statement.

Source: 2020 American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Survey of Dental School Seniors. Access the aggregate data for all 15 clinical areas through the ADEA Senior Student Dashboard at adea.org/Seniors2020

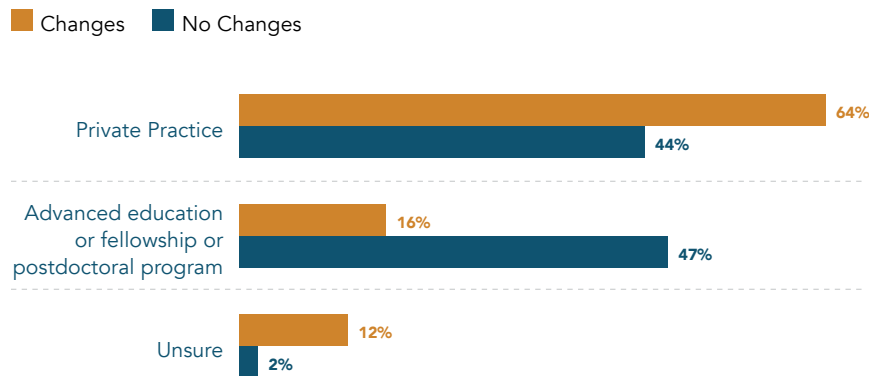
A dental professional wearing a white lab coat, a white hairnet, a clear face shield, and safety glasses is performing a procedure on a patient. The patient is lying back in a dental chair, wearing a white protective mask and a clear face shield. The dental professional is using a blue dental instrument. The background is dark and out of focus.

**77% OF THE
2020 SURVEY
PARTICIPANTS
REPORTED THAT
THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC
DID NOT
AFFECT THEIR
PLANS AFTER
GRADUATION.**

3 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC DID NOT CHANGE THE PROFESSIONAL PLANS OF MOST 2020 ADEA SURVEY RESPONDENTS.

More than three-quarters (77%) of the 2020 survey participants reported that the COVID-19 pandemic did not affect their plans after graduation. The respondents who reported changes were more likely to mention planning to go into dental practice, and especially into private practice (Figure 3). For those who indicated changes, most of their expressed concerns related to difficulties around finding jobs or retaining previous offers, licensure exams, and starting residency programs. Students’ perceptions were likely impacted by the timing of the ADEA survey, as the data were collected between April 15 and June 30, 2020.

FIGURE 3 Plans Upon Graduation and any Stated Changes to Professional Plans due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Percent of Respondents, 2020



Notes: The total number of respondents to both questions is 2,394. These are the three main plans upon graduation with statistically significant differences between the percent of those reporting any changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and those with no changes. The other professional plans include practicing as a dentist in a non-profit setting, teaching in a dental program, obtaining a position in dentistry other than practice in non-profit or in a private practice, and obtaining a position not related to dentistry.

Source: 2020 American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Survey of Dental School Seniors. Access the aggregate data through the ADEA Senior Student Dashboard at adea.org/Seniors2020

IN 2020,
HALF OF
ALL HURM
RESPONDENTS
INDICATED
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ENROLL IN
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EDUCATION,
UP FROM 40%
FIVE YEARS
EARLIER.

4 SENIOR PREDOCTORAL STUDENTS RESPONDING TO THE ADEA SURVEY INCREASINGLY PLANNED TO ATTEND ADVANCED DENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS UPON GRADUATION IN 2020.

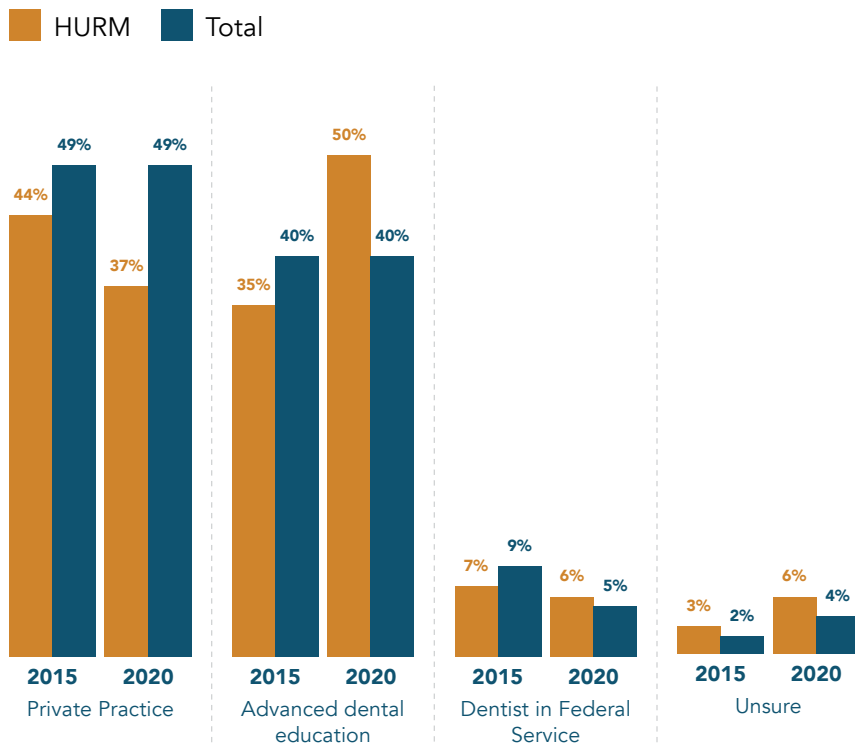
Between 2015 and 2020, the share of survey respondents who expressed plans to enter advanced education immediately after graduation increased from 35% to 40%. In 2020, half of all HURM respondents indicated plans to enroll in advanced education, up from 40% five years earlier. Respondents planning to pursue graduate dental programs were increasingly more interested in general dentistry programs (GPR and AEGD) than specialties.

Entering private practice remained the favorite professional choice for senior predoctoral students responding in 2020 to the ADEA survey. Almost half of 2020 respondents (49%) planned to work in a private practice upon graduation. Only 37% of 2020 HURM survey participants stated they planned to join a private practice upon graduation. Almost a third of the 2020 overall respondents who planned to go into private practice immediately upon graduation intended to join a Dental Service Organization (30%).

Meanwhile, the percentage of survey respondents intending to practice dentistry in federal government service almost halved, largely due to a decline in plans to join the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps and the military. A small percentage of respondents (2%) planned for other career opportunities, such as practicing in a not-for-profit clinic (0.8%), a state or local government clinic (0.3%), teaching in a dental program (0.3%), other positions in dentistry (0.3%) or a position not related to dentistry (0.3%).

FIGURE 4

Immediate Professional Plans Upon Graduation, Percent of Respondents, 2015 and 2020



Notes: The number of respondents to this question in 2020 was 2,396 total and 301 for HURM students, and in 2015 was 4,631 total and 554 for HURM students. Dentist in federal service includes serving as a dentist in the military, U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, Federally Qualified Health Centers, U.S. Veteran Affairs and other federal government institutions. Historically underrepresented and marginalized (HURM) students include the following four race and ethnicity categories: African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. These four race and ethnicity categories are defined by the U.S. Department of Education for reporting data from higher education institutions.

Source: 2015 and 2020 American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Survey of Dental School Seniors. Access the aggregate data through the ADEA Senior Student Dashboard at adea.org/Seniors2020

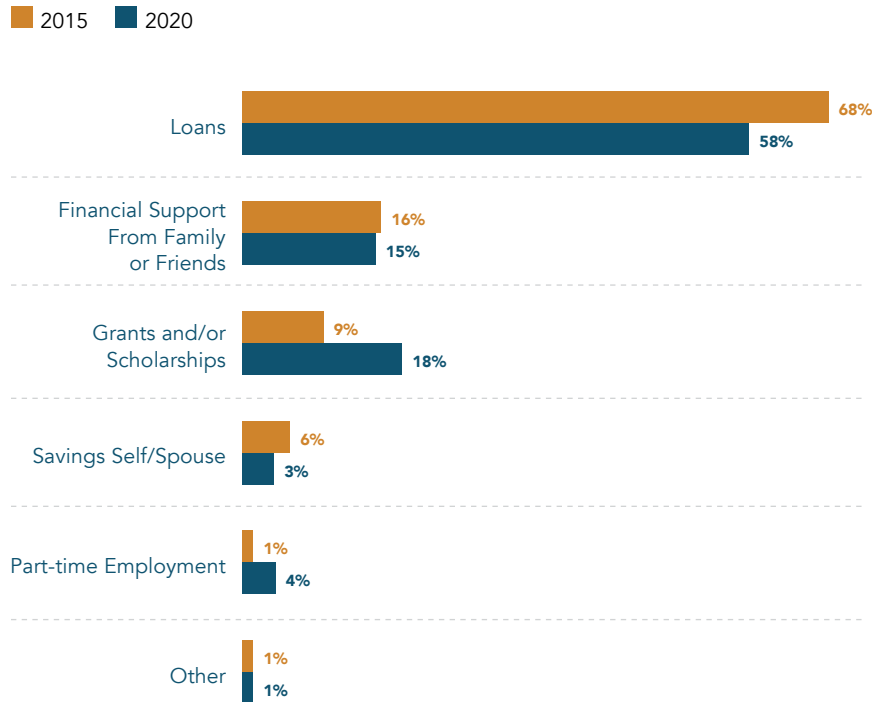
**A HIGHER
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DEBT OR
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DEBT THAN
IN 2015.**

**5 GRANTS AND SCHOLARSHIPS WERE A LARGER
SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR DENTAL DOCTORAL
DEGREES IN 2020 THAN FIVE YEARS AGO.**

On average, ADEA 2020 survey respondents financed more than half of their dental education through loans (58%), the rest covered to a large degree by a combination of scholarships (18%) and financial support from close ones (15%) (Figure 5). Respondents to the 2015 ADEA survey reported a higher proportion of loans (68%) and less grants and scholarships (9%) than their 2020 counterparts. Federal loans persisted as the top source of debt financing for dental school education. A higher proportion of the 2020 respondents expected to graduate from dental school with no dental school debt or educational debt (dental school and predental educational debt) than in 2015. The average educational debt (dental school and predental educational debt) for the senior students with debt recorded an upward trend over the past five years. Between 2015 and 2020, the average educational debt for those with debt rose by 3.4%, more for the respondents attending public schools (4.3%), and less for survey participants attending private and private state-related schools (2.9%).

FIGURE 5

Sources of Funding of Dental Doctoral Education of Survey Respondents, Average of the Percentage of Each Funding Source as Stated by Respondents, 2015 and 2020



Sources: 2015 and 2020 American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Survey of Dental School Seniors. Access the aggregate data through the ADEA Senior Student Dashboard at adea.org/Seniors2020

2020 was a difficult year for everyone in the United States and abroad. In these uncertain times, a new generation of dentists graduated from the 66 accredited U.S. dental schools in the 2019–2020 academic year. **U.S. dental schools continued their mission to train and graduate oral health professionals and provide oral health care through their clinics to local communities.**

ADEA

THE VOICE OF
DENTAL EDUCATION

ABOUT ADEA: The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) is The Voice of Dental Education. Our mission is to lead and support the health professions community in preparing future-ready oral health professionals. Our members include all 78 U.S. and Canadian dental schools, more than 800 allied and advanced dental education programs, 50 corporations and approximately 18,000 individuals. Our activities encompass a wide range of research, advocacy, faculty development, meetings and communications, including the esteemed *Journal of Dental Education*[®], as well as the dental school application services ADEA AADSAS[®], ADEA PASS[®], ADEA DHCAS[®] and ADEA CAAPID[®].

For more information, visit adea.org.

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