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Alternate Career Report

Alternate Career: Dental Hygiene Educator

To create efficient and competent clinicians in hygiene, the instruction and tutelage of experienced dental hygienists is necessary. Educators in the hygiene field are often hired by universities, community colleges, and private teaching facilities; and some are even hired to teach continuing education courses and seminars. Teaching methods may include distance education coursework, in-person seminars and labs, and onsite clinical instruction. The qualifications to instruct dental hygiene differ from state-to-state, and by hiring organization.

Educational requirements to qualify for a position as a hygiene educator may include a bachelor's degree in dental hygiene or associate's degree in dental hygiene from an accredited program and a bachelor's degree, often [but not always] in a related health field. Some organizations may require their educators to possess a Master's degree. Potential educators should have current knowledge of clinical practices. They must meet the qualifications in accordance with their state's dental hygiene practice act, and must also hold a current Registered Dental Hygienist license with no pending actions against his or her license.

Educators must maintain current certification of Basic Life Support for healthcare professionals and professional liability insurance coverage; these are the same requirements for practicing hygienists to maintain licensure. Some organizations also require current membership in a professional dental organization such as the ADHA or ADA. Documented current immunization and tuberculosis clearance is often a required component for employment.

To facilitate higher learning, hygiene instructors who intend to do more than clinical instruction should have a working knowledge of Microsoft Office, distance learning software, and dental software programs such as Patterson Eaglesoft, Dentrrix, and Panda. They should have knowledge of current state, federal and local laws and regulations for both educational organizations and dental healthcare providers.

Dental hygiene educators can who work a regular full or part-time position may be eligible for benefits that include a health, dental and vision plan; vacation, sick and holiday schedule; tuition reimbursement; a 401(k) plan; and/or even a flexible spending account.

I interviewed Michelle Cummins, a Contracted Full Time Faculty Dental Hygiene Instructor at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon. According to Michelle, she has a workload of .80 FTE, which means she is contracted to work 80% of the full time teaching load. The FTE is calculated in an interesting way. For lecture classes, instructors at Lane are contracted hour for hour, but for labs they are not. Labs are contracted as 68% of an hour. The workload is for the academic year only—September through June. Most instructors at Lane are not contracted to work summer term. In addition to teaching, Lane requires its lead educators to participate in an additional 12% in activities associated with college business. This business could be committees, meetings, conferences, etc.

As the first year clinical lead instructor, Michelle is responsible for teaching and leading the first year clinical courses. To get to her .80 FTE, she also teaches two additional lecture courses and works in clinics and labs designated for second year student instruction. As part of her position, Michelle is responsible for organizing the pre-clinic labs and clinics; training and

calibrating with other faculty in the team; scheduling dentists; preparing rotations and schedules; and grading.

According to Michelle, “What I like most about the job, is that I get to take students from knowing very little (not even knowing how to hold an instrument, or even know what an instrument is...) to learning about oral health, to seeing patients. One of the really unique things about working in first year; is that I get the opportunity to see students transition from unknowing, insecure, and timid, to being capable and confident. And for some students the confidence can be liberating. The other thing I like about teaching is that I get to build relationships that truly last a lifetime. You cannot imagine how fun it is to see students at courses and associations meetings after they graduate and have become professionals. It is like being a proud parent.” Michelle enjoys having summers off and the flexibility her time as an instructor allows her to have.

What she says she likes least about her job, is something that can be found in any large organization, college bureaucracy and a constant worry about budgets. “There are so many rules in the college system that things get done rather slowly. Approvals for this, that, and the other, take FOREVER. And sometimes, you never do get an approval because someone has forgotten or your request has been pushed aside. Also, since the college is funded by state, we are constantly under the watchful eye of the administration who is scrutinizing every bit of money spent, even if it is legitimate.” She also stated that it can be difficult managing varying work ethics while working with a large staff. Continuity and consistency of instruction can be difficult to maintain when there are multiple staff members. Despite these issues, Michelle says, “I would not give up what I do, because the positives far outweigh the negatives. “

Personally the idea of someday educating others in dental hygiene implementation and theories, one of my passions, is something I am highly interested in. I have been told for years that I would make a great teacher, but it was not until I was about two-thirds of the way through hygiene school and had the opportunity to have some of the first year students assist me that I realized just how much I enjoy mentoring others. I can most definitely see myself spending part of my career in hygiene helping mold others to be caring, confident, and competent clinicians.

Sources

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