

# WINTER 2025

A PRE-DENTAL GUIDE TO DENTAL SCHOOL



VOLUME 10 ISSUE 1



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# T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

## NEWSLETTER TEAM

3 Message from Pre-Dental  
Outreach Chairs

4 Message from Editors-  
In-Chief

5 Meet the Newsletter  
Team

## FEATURES

6 Looking Into the Future:  
Advancements  
in Special Needs  
Dentistry

9 Bridging the Gap:  
The Crucial Role of  
Nutrition in Oral and  
Overall Health

7 A Pre-Dental Student's  
Guide to the Specialties  
of Dentistry

10 Gap Years: An  
Alternative Route to  
Dental School

8 Rooted in Trust: The  
Vulnerability in Dental  
Care

12 Preparing for Person-  
Centered Care in  
Dentistry

## KEEP IN TOUCH

15 How to Keep in Contact with Us



# MESSAGE FROM PRE-DENTAL OUTREACH CHAIRS

WE'RE EXCITED TO SEE SO MANY INDIVIDUALS INTERESTED IN DENTISTRY. WHILE THIS IS UNDOUBTEDLY A CHALLENGING PATH, IT IS EQUALLY REWARDING AND RICH WITH OPPORTUNITIES. WE HOPE THAT THE FOLLOWING INSIGHTS SHARED BY YOUR FELLOW PRE-DENTAL STUDENTS WILL INSPIRE YOU IN YOUR ENDEAVORS. ENJOY THE 2025 ISSUE OF LEEWAY SPACE!



Evana Salem,  
UCLA D2



Victor Li, UCLA D2

THE UCLA ASDA PRE-DENTAL OUTREACH COMMITTEE AND THE 2024-2025 LEEWAY SPACE NEWSLETTER TEAM ARE EXCITED TO RELEASE VOLUME 10, ISSUE I PUBLICATION OF OUR NEWSLETTER, WRITTEN BY AND FOR PRE-DENTAL STUDENTS! THE PRE-DENTAL JOURNEY CAN BE DIFFICULT AND CONFUSING AT TIMES, BUT HEARING THE EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF FELLOW PRE-DENTAL STUDENTS CAN OFTEN OFFER MUCH-NEEDED GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT. LEEWAY SPACE IS A PUBLICATION FOR PRE-DENTAL STUDENTS TO DELVE INTO DENTAL TOPICS THEY ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT. OUR WRITERS, EDITORS, GRAPHIC DESIGNERS, AND EDITORS-IN-CHIEFS HAVE PUT SO MUCH EFFORT AND DEDICATION INTO CREATING THIS PUBLICATION. WE SINCERELY HOPE YOU WILL ENJOY THE ARTICLES WRITTEN BY OUR AMAZING TEAM AND BE INSPIRED BY THEIR JOURNEYS!

SINCERELY,

EVANA SALEM AND VICTOR LI  
ASDA PRE-DENTAL OUTREACH COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS 2024-2025

*Evana Salem & Victor Li*

# MESSAGE FROM EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Dear Readers,

We are excited to bring you Volume 10: Issue 1 of Leeway Space! As a student-led magazine, Leeway Space serves as a platform for pre-dental students from all walks of life to share their unique journeys and aspirations within the field of dentistry. By embracing the diverse voices and perspectives of our team, this issue highlights the ever-evolving nature of dentistry and the various pathways that lead to this rewarding profession. We hope these stories inspire and resonate with you as much as they have with us.

In this edition, we delve into various topics designed to inspire and inform aspiring dental professionals. From advancements in special needs dentistry, such as innovative technologies and behavior management strategies, to the critical role of nutrition in oral health, each article explores a key facet of modern dental care. We also discuss the benefits of alternative paths to dental school, including taking gap years, and emphasize the importance of trust and vulnerability in building meaningful patient relationships. Additional pieces shine a light on the value of community service, volunteering, and strategies for delivering person-centered care.

Our previous experience in Leeway Space has inspired us to continue the efforts of the newsletter to motivate and guide pre-dental students on their journey to dental school. We are beyond grateful for the opportunity to lead an outstanding team of writers, editors, and graphic designers who all share the same level of commitment and passion for dentistry! We hope readers are able to sense the collaboration and research that went into creating the publication. We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to Evana & Victor, the Co-Chairs of the UCLA ASDA Pre-Dental Outreach Committee, for their exceptional leadership skills and dedication towards seeing pre-dental students succeed. Finally, we would like to thank you all for supporting Leeway Space and we wish you all the best on your pre-dental journey!

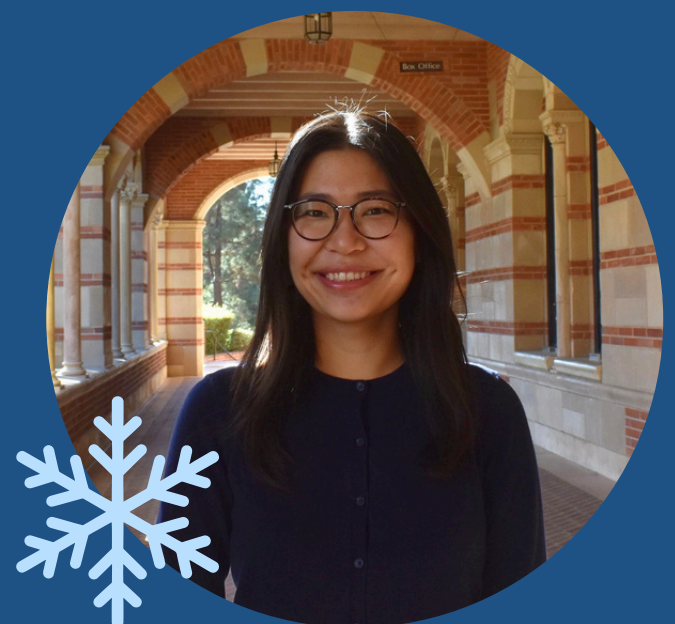
Warm regards,

Terrence Chi & Misheel Unur  
Leeway Space Editors-In-Chief

*Terrence Chi & Misheel Unur*



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# MEET THE NEWSLETTER TEAM



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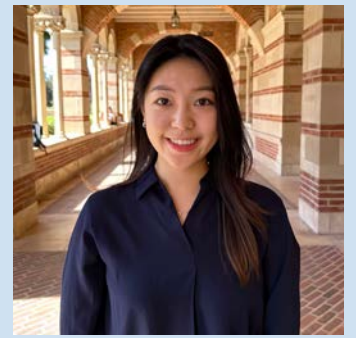
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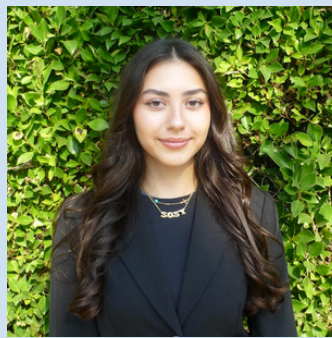
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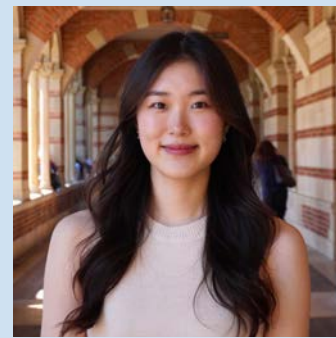
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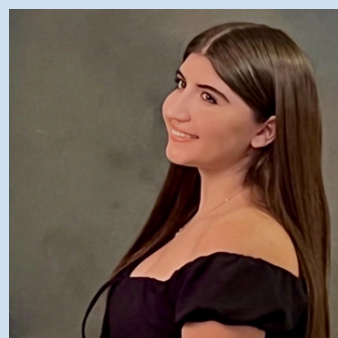
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# LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE: ADVANCEMENTS IN SPECIAL NEEDS DENTISTRY

Though there is no specialty designated solely to treating special needs patients, many dental schools across the United States have programs and clubs within their curriculum aimed at improving the care for this specialized population. For instance, the University of Washington's School of Dentistry established its Dental Education in the Care of Persons with Disabilities (DECOD) program in 1974 to provide clinical services and quality care for individuals with disabilities, while also furthering the education of their current students by giving exposure to treatment and interactions with these individuals (UW School of Dentistry, 2024). Nonetheless, it is estimated that "only 69% of dentists treat patients with disabilities" (Holena, 2024). For undergraduate students interested in treating special needs patients in the future, it can be challenging to find practices to shadow that consistently treat these patients, while also allowing outsiders to observe.

While there is still much improvement and learning to be done, there have been many advancements in dental technology that have assisted in treating special needs patients. One tool, the Solea® All-Tissue Laser, is a CO2 laser that eliminates the need for local anesthetic. This is beneficial for patients who have a fear of needles, allowing providers to perform their treatments in a more timely manner. According to one dentist who treats patients with disabilities, Dr. Holena, "Solea has been a game-changer when it comes to putting patients and their caregivers at ease, and it has allowed me to treat patients who had refused treatment at other clinics. I can also perform multi-quadrant, same-day dentistry, allowing me to get more done in a single appointment" (2024).

One of the most common drawbacks for dentists wanting to provide care for special needs patients is accommodating patients with wheelchairs in small office spaces. The DentalEZ J-Chair is one solution to this problem as it is built with an inflatable base that can be moved away from the center of treatment rooms to create space for patients in wheelchairs (Levy, 2016). Oftentimes, patients are either unable to move from their wheelchairs to the operating chair, or they just feel more comfortable receiving care from their wheelchair. Another tool useful for treating patients in wheelchairs is Specialized Care Company's Head Support for Wheelchairs, which is placed behind the patient's back and lifts their head up to the correct angle for the dentist to perform work on. The chair is priced comparably to a standard model, while the head support is listed at \$208.00 on the Specialized Care Company's website. These additional tools offer an affordable solution, enabling dentists to enhance care for special needs patients without incurring extensive financial strain.



ALEXANDRA DONELL UCLA '27

As pre-dental students, we have a long journey ahead before we can begin utilizing these tools. However, it's encouraging to see the field continually evolving, with new and innovative products entering the market each year. Learning about these products now will allow us to become knowledgeable and ready to utilize them in the future. One way we can get involved now is through clubs and programs aimed at supporting special needs individuals. Best Buddies is an organization that is active across all 50 states, providing guidance and friendship to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Many college campuses have active programs that welcome students to participate as peer mentors, providing valuable opportunities for mentorship and meaningful interactions. Another program, PALS, provides a week-long camp experience to individuals with Down syndrome across university campuses in the United States. This camp takes place in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and others throughout the summer. Individuals interested in volunteering to support participants during their camp experience can apply through the PALS website starting in December for the following summer. These programs and others alike allow undergraduate students to gain increased exposure to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which could aid them in their future treatment as dentists.

Current advancements and research regarding treating this population provide undergraduate students with hope for what the future could entail. With the proper training, equipment, and attitude towards care, providing treatment to special needs patients can become more equitable, and we can make more strides for future generations of dental professionals.

## GET INVOLVED!

BEST BUDDIES



PALS



Galia Odabashian  
Pepperdine University '25

# A PRE-DENTAL STUDENT'S GUIDE TO THE SPECIALTIES OF DENTISTRY

As pre-dental students, we often begin our journey by learning the fundamentals of dentistry: oral hygiene, restorative procedures, and patient care. However, as we delve deeper into the field, it becomes clear that dentistry is a dynamic and diverse profession with numerous specialties. Each focuses on unique aspects of oral health, offering distinct career paths that blend science, artistry, and patient care. Understanding these specialties early in your journey can help you identify your interests, shape your career aspirations, and broaden your perspective on the profession. Discovering your passion can also guide your dental school applications, extracurricular activities, and shadowing experiences.

## ORTHODONTICS: PERFECTING ALIGNMENT AND FUNCTION

Orthodontics is one of the most recognized dental specialties, focusing on diagnosing, preventing, and treating dental and facial irregularities. Orthodontists use braces, aligners, and other appliances to straighten teeth, correct bite issues, and enhance overall dental function. By improving alignment, they contribute to both aesthetics and functionality, helping patients achieve healthier, more confident smiles. This specialty may appeal to students interested in facial aesthetics, cutting-edge technology like 3D imaging, and forming long-term relationships with patients.

## PROSTHODONTICS: RESTORING SMILES WITH PRECISION

Prosthodontics specializes in restoring and replacing teeth. Prosthodontists often manage complex cases involving missing, damaged, or malformed teeth, using crowns, bridges, dentures, and dental implants to enhance both function and appearance. The blend of science and artistry in this specialty allows prosthodontists to transform patients' smiles with precision and creativity. For those who take pride in crafting meticulous restorations and changing lives through dentistry, prosthodontics can be a deeply fulfilling path.

## PERIODONTICS: CARING FOR THE FOUNDATION OF ORAL HEALTH

Periodontics focuses on the health of the gums and supporting structures of the teeth. Periodontists diagnose and treat gum disease, perform gum surgeries, and place dental implants. This specialty plays a critical role in maintaining the foundation of oral health. Students who are committed to preventing tooth loss, promoting gum health, and ensuring long-term patient well-being may find this specialty particularly rewarding.

## ENDODONTICS: SAVING TEETH FROM WITHIN

Endodontics deals with the intricacies of the inner tooth, particularly the pulp and root canals. Endodontists often perform root canal treatments, using advanced tools and techniques to save teeth from extraction. This specialty is ideal for individuals fascinated by the complexities of tooth anatomy, who enjoy problem-solving and precision-based work. Saving patients' natural teeth and alleviating their pain are central to the rewards of this specialty.

## ORAL AND MAXILLOFACIAL SURGERY: MASTERING COMPLEXITIES

Oral and maxillofacial surgery addresses some of the most complex and high-stakes cases in dentistry. Surgeons in this specialty handle a range of procedures, including impacted teeth removal, facial trauma repair, jaw reconstruction, and oral cancer treatment. Often at the intersection of medicine and dentistry, oral and maxillofacial surgery requires extensive surgical training. It is a fitting choice for students who thrive in fast-paced environments, are passionate about surgical procedures, and enjoy working with facial anatomy.

## PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY: BUILDING HEALTHY HABITS EARLY

Pediatric dentistry focuses on the oral health of children, from infancy through adolescence. Pediatric dentists address the unique challenges of growing teeth, manage children's behavior during dental visits, and educate families on preventive care and oral hygiene. This specialty requires patience, creativity, and a positive attitude, making it ideal for those who enjoy working with children and want to create welcoming and stress-free dental experiences for young patients.



## WHAT MIGHT BE FOR YOU?

### ORTHODONTICS

- drawn to facial aesthetics, cutting-edge technology (such as 3D imaging and advanced orthodontic systems),
- long-term patient relationships

### PROSTHODONTICS

- detail-oriented
- have a passion for crafting precise and beautiful restorations
- enjoy transforming lives through smiles

### PERIODONTICS

- passionate about preventing tooth loss, helping patients achieve healthier gums, and working with the essential foundations of oral health

### ENDODONTICS

- fascinated by the intricacies of tooth anatomy
- enjoy problem-solving
- like precision work



## FINDING YOUR PATH IN DENTISTRY

Dentistry is a profession with something for everyone. Whether you are drawn to the artistry of restorative work, the precision of surgery, or the rewarding experience of working with children, the opportunities within dentistry are vast. To find your ideal path, it is important to explore these specialties through shadowing, internships, and conversations with professionals. Keep an open mind as your interests may evolve during dental school, and embrace the journey of discovery. The dental profession is about more than fixing teeth—it is about transforming lives, one smile at a time. By understanding these specialties early in your journey, you will be better equipped to make informed decisions and build a fulfilling career in dentistry. So, where will your path take you?

# ROOTED IN TRUST: THE VULNERABILITY IN DENTAL CARE



Sosy Kalijian  
Glendale Community  
College '27

Behind every smile is a story waiting to be heard, and I have made it my mission to listen. Over the past three years as a lead dental assistant, I've had the privilege of working with patients from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. This experience has deepened my understanding of how health disparities and other underlying factors can influence patient treatment outcomes. Working in a holistic dental clinic, I've been a part of a team that prioritizes patients, excels in responsibilities, and actively seeks knowledge through thoughtful questioning. I've focused on creating a supportive and comforting environment, by emphasizing the importance of patient-centered care. These experiences have shown me that the foundation of quality dental care lies in empathy and meaningful connections.

In the dental chair, patients often feel vulnerable due to a perceived power imbalance, making trust the foundation of effective care. The first impression is crucial, and the assistant plays a vital role as the initial point of connection and comfort. Some patients walk in excitedly, confident in their choice of care, while others hesitate, their nervous smiles betraying lingering past dental trauma. Not one patient is the same as another, so adapting and catering to each person's physical and emotional needs is the key to success. It is crucial to begin by greeting the patient warmly and asking how they are. Introducing yourself and informing them of the procedure also helps reassure patients of your preparedness and focus. Some people appreciate the warm scented neck pillows offered on cold winter days, while others prefer the noise-canceling headphones paired with a movie of their choice during procedures. These small acts of service can significantly help soften the impact of the piercing noise from the drill. They also help create an ambiance of comfort. Additionally, having an aesthetically pleasing and low-distraction clinic environment can help patients focus on staying calm before beginning the treatment. Research highlights the importance of these measures. According to the study "Focus on Patient Comfort," a well-designed environment significantly reduces patient stress by creating a space where patients feel at ease. Having all instruments covered and hidden from view is essential in minimizing visual stress and apprehension. This emphasizes the importance of considering not only the technical aspects of care, but also the psychological and emotional needs of patients.

Establishing trust is about understanding a patient's psychological makeup and responding to their unique needs. A study, "Trusting the Dentist—Expecting a Leap of Faith vs. a Well-Defined Strategy for Anxious Patients" (Ho et al., 2024) mentions that trust in the dentist-patient relationship directly impacts patient compliance and influences regular care-seeking behavior. A skilled dentist understands that the numbing process is often the first moment during which a patient can experience discomfort in the chair. Taking the time to perform this step with both caution and compassion can significantly alleviate the patient's anxiety.

Communication is key to ensuring procedural comfort. Dentists can enhance personalized care by regularly briefing patients who prefer detailed explanations, while respecting the wishes of those who prefer less information. Depending on age and personality, some people prefer demonstrations, while others appreciate drawings and creative analogies explaining the procedures further before beginning. Taking photos of each significant step and showcasing results at the end can also be a valuable tool for transparency and can reinforce trust and appreciation for the procedure. Checking on patients at each step makes sure they are comfortable and ready to proceed, reinforcing their sense of safety and adding a sense of control. This helps reclaim the patient's empowerment which is usually diminished in the dental setting. These experiences have solidified my commitment to creating a practice that prioritizes patient autonomy.

Most invasive medical procedures involve narcosis, during which patients place their trust in the doctor only initially, while not actually experiencing the procedure and waking up when it is fully complete. However, in dentistry, most procedures are performed while patients are awake, often with local anesthesia. Since this experience is ongoing and more challenging, it amplifies the patient's perception of stress. Therefore, mastering the art of patience and compassion fosters a strong foundation of continuous trust, essential for a positive patient experience.

One interaction I experienced with a patient emphasized the notion of individualized care. This patient opened up to me about why they chose to avoid anesthetics. Recalling childhood memories of saving his mother's money during his dental visits, he shared how he managed pain using calming techniques. He lightly tapped his fingers on the chair as a subtle gesture of resilience, managing the pain instead of holding it in. This interaction taught me the importance of recognizing each patient's personal and emotional history, inspiring me to adapt my approach to meet their unique needs. Research from the systematic review "Strategies for Effective Dentist-Patient Communication: A Literature Review" (Moore, 2022) supports the efficacy of behavioral techniques, like rapport building and individualized communication, in reducing patient fear. This finding highlights the transformative power of genuine human connection in healthcare settings, where listening actively and responding empathetically can bridge the gap between clinical procedures and patient comfort. By communicating to meet individual needs, dentists can not only alleviate fear but also empower patients to feel more in control of their care, fostering long-term loyalty and a willingness to seek routine treatment, a key component in preventive dental health.

These insights have deeply shaped my vision for the future. My mission is to ensure that every patient leaves the dental chair feeling not only healthier, but also more confident and valued. By placing trust at the core of the dentist-patient relationship, I strive to build a practice that exemplifies respect, empathy, and healing. My goal is to create an environment where patients feel motivated and excited to return to continue their dental journey. Through thoughtful communication and care, we can transform what might feel like a moment of weakness into an opportunity for strength, patient by patient, and smile by smile.

Being Rooted in Trust means extending care beyond its technical aspects to listen to every unique story, tailor each interaction to meet their needs, and cultivate a safe space where vulnerability is met with compassion. Just as the structure of a tooth depends on its roots, the strength of the dentist-patient relationship ultimately lies in trust.



# BRIDGING THE GAP: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF NUTRITION IN ORAL AND OVERALL HEALTH



Giselle Sapiens  
UCSD '24

When you think about maximizing oral health, what comes to mind? For many, the answer is regular brushing and flossing. Others may think about the importance of maintaining routine dental checkups and cleanings. “Did you know that over 26% of adults aged 20–64 in the United States have untreated tooth decay, with diets high in sugar and low in essential nutrients like calcium and vitamin D being major contributors to poor oral health?” (National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research [NIDCR], 2022). The shift from a nutrient-dense, whole-food diet to a Western-style diet—high in refined sugars, unhealthy fats, excessive salt, and low fiber and essential vitamins—has led to increased oral health issues and chronic conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. While traditional oral hygiene practices like brushing, flossing, and dental checkups are essential, exploring the often-overlooked impact of nutrition on oral health reveals how a balanced and nutrient-rich diet can prevent tooth decay, strengthen teeth and gums, and improve overall quality of life.

## The Role of Diet and Nutrition in Oral Health

Modern dietary habits influence our overall health but also play a critical role in shaping our oral health. Let's first understand what diet and nutrition mean. A diet refers to the food and beverages a person consumes, along with the mental and physical factors that influence their eating habits. In contrast, nutrition focuses on the micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) and macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats) that meet the body's essential dietary needs. These nutritional components significantly impact oral health, influencing the development and progression of conditions such as cavities, gum disease, and enamel erosion. For instance, “calcium—a crucial mineral—supports the strength and structure of teeth and jawbones. Most of the body's calcium is stored in teeth and bones, providing strength and resilience. However, the body requires vitamin D to effectively absorb calcium, raising the question: how much calcium is necessary?” (Department of Health & Human Services, 2022) The answer varies based on factors like age and sex. “In the United States, dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese account for approximately 72% of calcium intake, making them essential for maintaining oral health.” (National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research [NIDCR], 2022)

## Impact of Sugary and Acidic Foods on Oral Health

Frequent consumption of sugary and acidic foods weakens enamel and harms gums increasing oral health concerns. The effects of acidic foods and sugary beverages on the teeth, and the long-term consequences can be even more damaging. “Frequent consumption of these foods and drinks erodes minerals from tooth enamel, weakening it over time. This process is known as demineralization.” (*Malakar, et al., 2022*) Acids in the mouth lower the pH, leading to mineral loss from the tooth surface, which can expose dentin and result in sensitivity, pain, and structural damage. Prolonged acid exposure can also irritate and inflame the gums, increasing their vulnerability to infections and periodontal disease. Once enamel is damaged, restoration often requires professional dental care, making prevention essential. According to the NIH, saliva is critical in neutralizing acids in the mouth and protecting teeth by acting as a natural buffer. It absorbs acidity from food and drinks, prevents enamel erosion, and reduces the risk of cavities.

Additionally, minerals like calcium, phosphate, and fluoride in saliva help remineralize teeth after acidic exposure. It is essential to limit the intake of sugary and acidic foods while cultivating habits that promote healthy saliva flow, such as staying hydrated and rinsing the mouth with water after consuming acidic foods. To further protect oral health, “consuming foods rich in calcium and magnesium, like dairy and leafy greens, is vital” (*Chan et al., 2023*). Studies show that individuals with sufficient calcium intake reduce their risk of periodontal disease by 54%. Maintaining a balanced diet with minimal sugary and acidic foods can go a long way in preserving tooth enamel, preventing cavities, and ensuring long-term oral health.

## Strategies for Integrating Nutrition into Dentistry

As future dental professionals, we have the privilege of shaping the health of our patients' mouths and their overall well-being by integrating nutrition into dental practices. Below are some ways we can incorporate nutrition in dentistry:

1. Incorporating dietary assessments into regular dental checkups to address potential oral health issues early.
2. Educate patients on the connection between nutrition, oral health, and its influence on overall well-being.
3. Integrating nutrition counseling and oral hygiene advice to address dietary habits that might compromise optimal health.
4. Providing educational materials and resources about nutrient-rich foods and their impact on oral and systemic health.
5. Promoting preventative care strategies, such as advocating for reduced sugar consumption and healthier food options.

In conclusion, our unique position allows us to make a significant impact on patients' oral health and overall well-being by integrating nutrition into dental care. By identifying risk factors early, providing dietary assessments, and offering nutritional guidance during dental checkups, we can empower our patients with knowledge about the critical connection between nutrition and oral health. Furthermore, by collaborating with dietitians, we can address dietary habits affecting oral and systemic health, emphasizing prevention and early detection. As we continue to advance in our careers, understanding the relationship between nutrition and oral health will enable us to deliver more holistic care, provide healthier lifestyles, and promote long-term wellness. By integrating nutrition into dental care, we can elevate our approach beyond cavities, infections, and diseases. As future dental professionals, we must actively educate and guide our patients in making nutrition-conscious decisions for improved oral health. Our goal is to provide comprehensive care beyond oral health, focusing on their overall well-being. By ensuring every patient we serve receives the best possible health outcome, we contribute to promoting a healthier future for all.

# GAP YEARS: AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO DENTAL SCHOOL

Daisy Barajas  
CSU Long  
Beach '21



Gap years are becoming a common practice among many pre-dental students. Rather than traditionally applying to dental school the summer before their senior year of college, students are applying at a later time, after taking one or more years off after graduation. Despite delaying your dental school journey, a gap year provides pre-dental students numerous opportunities to grow, improve as applicants, and get everything in order (e.g., finances) before starting dental school.

## What is a Gap Year?

According to the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), a gap year is when a student takes time off between graduating from college and starting dental school, ranging from one to several years (“Gap Year Students”).

## Reasons for Taking a Gap Year:

A few reasons pre-dental students take one or more gap years are to 1) improve their dental school applications, 2) save money for application fees or tuition, or 3) take a break after a stressful four (or more) years of undergrad. Commonly pre-dental students take a gap year to strengthen their dental school applications to increase their chances of gaining admissions. Applying to dental school is competitive and there are many requirements to fulfill. In addition to your prerequisite courses and GPAs (both science and overall), many admission committees look at your Dental Admission Test (DAT) score, dental experiences/shadowing, community service/volunteering, personal statement, and letters of recommendation when deciding who to admit. Fulfilling these requirements takes time and dedication, which can feel overwhelming while managing the rigorous course loads of undergrad. Although managing a demanding course load while completing dental school requirements is doable, that is not true for every pre-dental student. Taking a gap year provides additional time to meet any remaining requirements not fulfilled during undergrad or to strengthen specific areas of your applications (e.g., increasing shadowing hours or DAT score), making you a more competitive applicant.

## Should You Take a Gap Year?

When considering taking a gap year, review your application and then ask yourself: Have you met all the requirements for dental school? Are your stats competitive (e.g., GPAs, shadowing and volunteering hours, and DAT score) or do they need improvement? Are there any weaknesses in your application? If you were to submit your application as is, would you be accepted into dental school? After reviewing my application, I identified several areas that were still incomplete (e.g., letters of recommendation, personal statement, and the DAT) and others that needed improvement (e.g., volunteering hours, shadowing hours, and GPA). Taking a gap year has allowed me to improve different sections of my application while participating in many opportunities.

## MY GAP YEAR EXPERIENCE:

When I decided to take a gap year, I felt unsure and worried about starting a new chapter after graduating from undergrad. It was an unprecedented experience for me and I felt that I was “falling behind” while other pre-dental students were moving forward. I was worried about how I would be perceived by others as a gap year student and unsure of how to make the most of this time. However, I decided to view this gap year as an opportunity to focus on becoming a competitive applicant and gaining meaningful experiences.

### During my gap years, I did the following:

- **Dental Shadowing:** After graduation, I returned to shadowing an endodontist for about eight months, observing various procedures, including root canal therapies (RCT), tooth extractions, and teeth cleanings. Shadowing for an extended period of time allowed me to learn an extensive amount of dentistry (e.g., reading X-rays, learning dental materials, and patient interactions). This experience made the transition to volunteering at a dental office much easier. Also, shadowing for a long time helped me to build a strong relationship with the dentist which made it more comfortable asking for a letter of recommendation.
- **GPA:** I enrolled in a post-baccalaureate program (post-bac) where I increased my GPA by taking many upper-division science courses—demonstrating a positive upward trend—while also improving my study habits and forming connections with my peers and instructors. A post-bac is for college graduates pursuing careers in the health professions (e.g., dentistry, medicine, nursing, physician assistant, etc.) who need to improve their GPA or complete the prerequisite courses (“Post-Baccalaureate Programs”). Taking upper-division science courses (e.g., pharmacology, endocrinology) strengthened my science foundation which has prepared me for dental school and the biology section of the DAT, as topics like endocrinology are on the exam. Enrolling in a post-bac program allowed me to meet other pre-health students (e.g. pre-med and pre-nursing), helping me learn how to collaborate with other future health professionals while also forming friendships along the way.
- **Volunteering:** Volunteering has been a big part of my gap years. I volunteered as a remote Health Advocate, connecting patients and families with different community resources based on their needs. I distributed food/pantry items at a food bank. Currently, I am volunteering at a hospital assisting various departments including urgent care, the emergency room, and more. Through these experiences, I realized that I enjoy serving my community and making a difference. It is something I plan to continue doing.

- **Dental Experience:** I had the chance to volunteer at Smiles for All 2023: A Day of Free Dental Care and CDA Cares Long Beach as a Spanish translator. I witnessed firsthand how certain communities, specifically low-income and minority groups, are impacted by a lack of dental care access. Seeing preventable tooth extractions in young adults further motivated me to become a dentist who serves and educates underserved communities, sparking my interest in Dental Public Health. Currently, I am volunteering at a dental office, in which I am sterilizing instruments, setting up and breaking down operatory rooms, and seating patients while also observing the role of a general dentist. This experience has helped me improve my teamwork, active listening, and problem-solving skills, which is essential for dental school.
- **Academic Enrichment Experience:** Since my gap years provided flexibility, I have been able to attend many in-person and virtual pre-dental events. These events gave me the chance to tour dental schools, learn about the curriculum and admissions process, network with pre-dental and dental students, improve my manual dexterity and interview skills, and receive feedback on my personal statement. With each event, I had a positive and informative experience. Attending these events inspired me to participate in pre-dental outreach events when I am in dental school. I understand the struggles as a pre-dental student and would love to help/mentor future students. Recently, I completed the Basic Dental Principles Laboratory course, where I learned about different restorative treatments and practiced these procedures in the dental school lab. I enjoyed working with my hands, finding it therapeutic and engaging, which further reassured me that dentistry is a career for me.

Reflecting on my gap years, it has been a journey of resilience. The experiences I had not only improved my application but reinforced my determination to become a dentist.

## WHAT TO DO DURING YOUR GAP YEAR:

During your gap year, it is crucial to stay productive and connected to dentistry, as dental schools will consider what you did during that time. Consider attending pre-dental outreach events, working as a dental assistant, shadowing different dental specialties besides general dentistry, studying for or retaking the DAT, volunteering at a dental clinic or non-dentistry-related organization, or taking science or non-science courses recommended by dental schools. For example, in addition to the prerequisites, the UCLA School of Dentistry recommends taking histology and physiology to strengthen your science foundations, and philosophy and communication to develop critical thinking and patient interaction skills (“Prerequisites for Admissions”).

A gap year is not a setback, but an opportunity to grow as an applicant by gaining valuable skills, experiences, and personal growth before starting dental school. There is not just one path to dental school—gap years are one of the many alternative routes. The time it takes or the route you choose does not matter, as long as you reach your goal of getting into dental school. Everyone’s path to dentistry is different, but our goal remains the same: to become dentists who make a positive difference in the lives of our future patients.



**Katherine Nguyen**  
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# PREPARING FOR PERSON-CENTERED CARE IN DENTISTRY

Dentistry is continuously evolving not only with the advancement of technology but also with our understanding of effective healthcare delivery. Currently, dental education and regulatory organizations are working towards implementing a person-centered care model to improve oral health outcomes. As pre-dental students, we can gain knowledge of health determinants and how to apply that knowledge to be prepared dentists of tomorrow.

Person-centered care (PCC) emphasizes disease management and prevention by incorporating a broad range of health determinants to personalize treatment plans, shared-decision making between the patient and provider, and interprofessional collaborative practice that integrates oral health and systemic health (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Currently, the care model in dentistry focuses on preventive and restorative procedural treatment that is based on generalizable recommendations that are not adapted to a patient's specific background and circumstances (Walji *et al.*, 2017). PCC recognizes the need to tailor treatment planning based on the patient's individual risk factors that impact oral health such as lifestyle factors, socioeconomic status, behavioral patterns, and medical history. Although there is limited information on the impact of PCC in dentistry, other healthcare fields that have integrated PCC have observed benefits such as improved patient health outcomes, patient satisfaction, healthcare provider work satisfaction, and reduced overall medical care charged annually (Kristensen *et al.*, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2018). PCC enables a more comprehensive and integrated view of the individual factors that affect a patient's oral health, leading to health, professional, and financial benefits for the community.

Given the benefits of the PCC model for both patients and providers, some organizations have made steps necessary to implement PCC in dental schools and practices. One challenge of applying PCC is the need for financial reform from a fee-for-service model which depends on the number and type of procedures performed to a value-based payment model that focuses on improving health outcomes. Improving health outcomes includes non-operative tasks to prevent or mitigate oral diseases such as communicating with the patient and other healthcare professionals to determine personal barriers to oral health, collaborating to design individualized home oral care plans, and researching to find applicable resources for patients. Value-based payment takes into account non-operative tasks to compensate dentists for their time and expertise, making it feasible for dentists to invest necessary resources to provide patients with high-quality care. To make progress towards financial reform, the American Dental Association has created the Dental Quality Alliance, an organization responsible for determining evidence-based methods to measure the quality of oral health care which is necessary to adopt a value-based financial model (Walji *et al.*, 2017). Another requirement to implement PCC is increasing interprofessional collaboration since PCC hinges on the integration of oral and systemic healthcare. Progress has also been made to address this challenge with the Commission on Dental Accreditation adding interprofessional education to its standards for dental education programs (Walji *et al.*, 2017). Lastly, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of PCC and evidence-based guidelines for using PCC in dentistry (Kristensen *et al.*, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2018). Although there are many challenges to overcome for major reform in dentistry, the American Dental Education Association Commission on Change and Innovation (ADEA CCI 2.0) has shown commitment to implementing PCC by stating that "person-centered health care will become the dominant model in health systems" and that "person-centered health care will be the first topic of focus for the ADEA CCI 2.0" (Palatta *et al.*, 2017).

As pre-dental students, there are ways we can prepare for and help create a future of PCC in dentistry. Since PCC depends on understanding how a variety of personal factors influence oral health, we should actively work towards understanding the experiences of diverse populations. Consistently participating in extracurriculars and volunteering events is an effective way to serve your community and have direct, meaningful connections to people of various backgrounds. These experiences will help develop your interpersonal connection skills and knowledge of how components of identity shape peoples' lives and health which are essential to helping your future patients achieve better health outcomes. Additionally, there is a broad range of research topics that you can become involved in to progress PCC's adoption in dentistry such as: determinants of health (biological, behavioral, social, economic, cultural, environmental, etc), intersections between oral health conditions and systemic conditions, accommodations in healthcare, health information technology, interoperability of health data between the dental and medical field. As pre-dental students, we have the power to help shape the field of dentistry by being intentional with the causes we work toward and the communities we advocate for to provide equitable healthcare for all patients.

**TO VIEW A SPREADSHEET WITH EXAMPLES  
OF APPLYING KNOWLEDGE FROM  
EXTRACURRICULARS TO PERSON-CENTERED  
CARE IN DENTISTRY, SCAN THIS CODE!**



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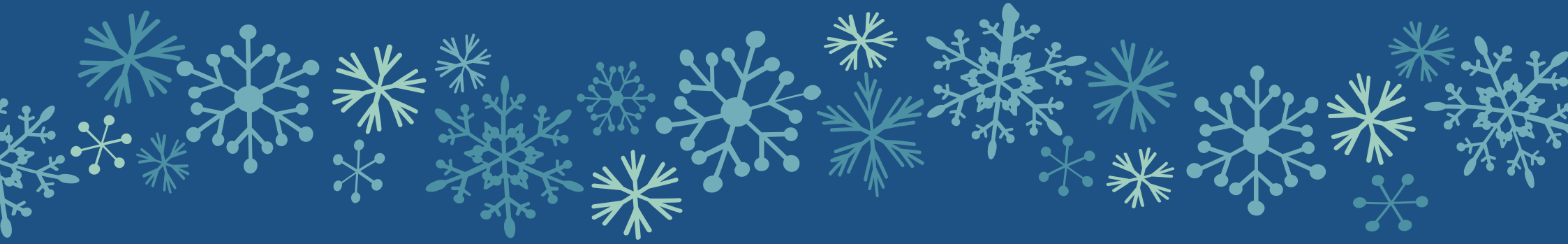
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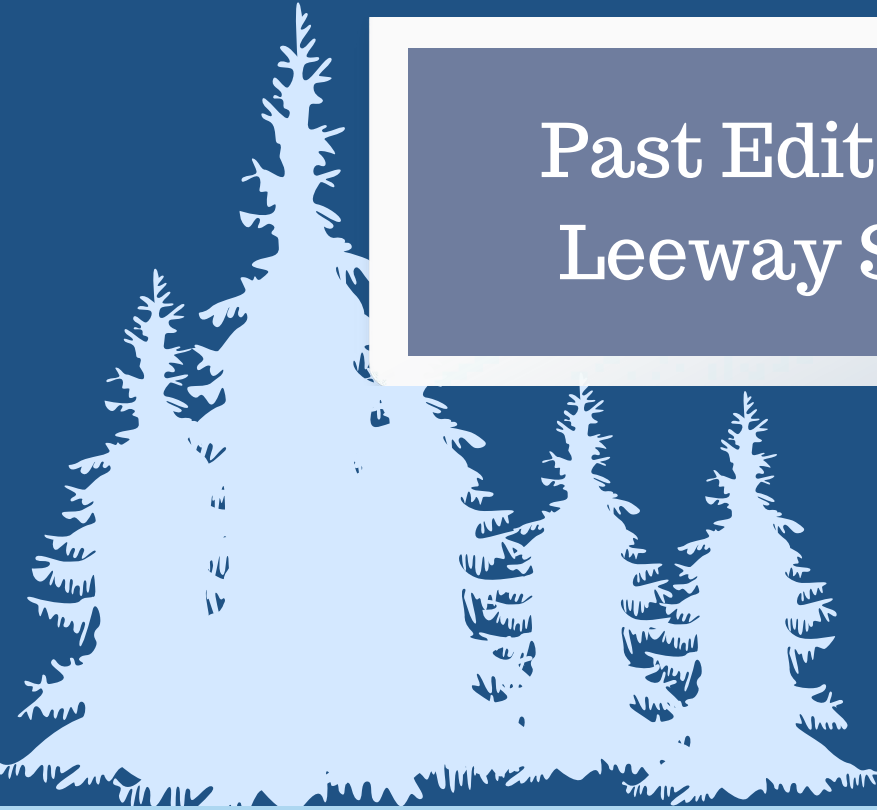


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