



Health Policy and Analytics
Health Care Workforce Initiatives

2026

Dental Assisting Workforce in Oregon

An overview of the state of the profession
and efforts to address workforce shortage



Other formats and languages

You can get this document in other languages, large print, braille or a format you prefer free of charge. Contact Oral Health Workforce Program at jonathan.p.mcelfresh@oha.oregon.gov or 503-305-3875 (voice/text). We accept all relay calls.

Acknowledgments

Oregon Health Authority (OHA) prepared this publication in collaboration with the Evaluation Assistance Program at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) Oregon Clinical and Translational Research Institute (OCTRI).

Please cite this publication as follows:

Oregon Health Authority. (2026). Dental Assisting Workforce in Oregon: An overview of the state of the profession and efforts to address workforce shortage. Salem, OR.

Additional contributors to this report include staff from the OHA Dental Director, OHA Health Care Workforce Initiatives team, OHA Equity & Inclusion Division, OHA Health Care Workforce Reporting Program, OHA Medicaid Systems Oral Health Team, Oregon Board of Dentistry, and Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

Thank you to the individuals at dental practices and community colleges that provided invaluable feedback and perspectives that informed this report.

This report was funded by a grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration.

Table of contents

Acknowledgments	2
Table of contents	3
Report background	4
Data sources	5
Oregon dental assistance workforce overview	5
Workforce turnover	6
Certifications and career advancements	7
Training pathways	9
Data sources and gaps	12
Dental assisting regulatory authorities	14
Efforts to address workforce	15
Dental practice perspectives and recommendations	20
Community college program perspectives and recommendations	23
Conclusion.....	25
Citations	28
Appendix A. Table of abbreviations	32
Appendix B. Oregon dental assistant training programs	33
Appendix C. Dental practice interview guide	35
Appendix D. Community college program interview guide	37

Report background

The dental assisting workforce plays a critical role in ensuring that dental practices across Oregon can provide timely, high-quality care. Dental teams rely on skilled dental assistants to keep practices running smoothly, support infection control, prepare patients and equipment, and help dentists deliver efficient care. When there are not enough dental assistants, patients can experience longer wait times, reduced appointment availability, and delays in receiving preventive and restorative care. This can worsen oral health outcomes, especially in rural and underserved communities.

This report was prepared to understand Oregon's dental assisting workforce challenges and opportunities. Supported by a federal grant, the report offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening this important workforce and improving oral health access for Oregonians. In particular, Oregon faces Medicaid network adequacy challenges. Dental assistant shortages restrict clinic capacity and directly limit provider participation in Medicaid.

In 2022, OHA was awarded a four-year, \$1.6 million grant by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration. The grant purpose is to develop and implement innovative programs that address dental workforce needs in federally designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (Dental HPSAs) and to demonstrate the effective use of innovative care delivery models for meeting oral health service needs in areas experiencing health inequities. To supplement grant projects, OHA contracted with Oregon Clinical and Translational Research Institute (OCTRI) at OHSU to conduct analyses on various aspects of Oregon's oral health workforce with limited state-based data, including dental assistants.

This report is part of ongoing efforts by OHA Health Care Workforce Initiatives staff to support the next generation of dental providers in addressing the oral health needs of rural and underserved populations throughout Oregon.

Data sources

This report uses various data sources. State-specific data from the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) and Oregon Employment Department, as well as oral health professional organizations such as the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB). This report also contains information included in public packets for the Oregon Dental Assistant Workforce Shortage Advisory Committee (DAWSAC) convened by the Oregon Board of Dentistry (OBD). Data from interviews with representatives from dental practices in the grant's priority areas and community college programs across Oregon provide additional context to these data sources. Methods for qualitative data collection are included alongside findings from the interviews. Lastly, a scoping review of relevant literature and efforts to address dental assistant workforce shortages in Oregon supplement this data.

Oregon dental assistance workforce overview

Dental assistants work under the supervision of dentists and dental therapists during treatment as an integral part of the operations and productivity of dental practices. The scope of practice for dental assistants is defined by the Dental Practice Act, which outlines who can provide dental care in Oregon and the bounds of services they can provide. (1) The Dental Practice Act was passed by the Oregon legislature and is administered by OBD). (1) Dental assisting tasks range from administrative duties, such as scheduling appointments and maintenance of dental practice records and supplies, to operational tasks such as

preparation of instrument trays, cleaning instruments, and instructing patients on proper oral hygiene and post-treatment care. (2) Dental assistants do not require certification to begin working chairside; however, they must be certified to conduct certain expanded duties such as taking x-rays or performing expanded orthodontic functions, restorative functions, preventative functions, or anesthesia functions. (2) DANB processes these certifications. (2)

According to the Oregon Employment Department, 5,525 dental assistants were employed in Oregon in 2024. (3) In addition, there are 813 dental assistant job openings per year, with a 11.6% projected 10-year growth rate. (3)

In 2026, the median hourly wage for a dental assistant is \$28.54, and the median wage range is \$22.31 to \$28.89, with the lower end being paid near South Central Oregon and higher wages being paid around the Portland Metro area. (3) No data is available regarding salary differences based on different training or certification levels in Oregon. (4)

Workforce turnover

While Oregon-specific data around retention rates is not available, survey data from both dental assistants and dental practices provide some context for what the Oregon Dental Association (ODA) describes as a “critical shortage” of dental assistants. (5) National data from the American Dental Association’s (ADA) Health Policy Institute shows that 40% of dentists surveyed reported that they were actively recruiting for a dental assistant or had done so in the last three months. (6) Of those dentists actively recruiting, 87% reported that they found those efforts to be “very” or “extremely challenging” though details as to why this is the case were not included. (6) Additionally, according to DANB’s 2024 Dental Assistants Salary and Satisfaction Survey, less than half (40%) of entry-level (0-2 years of experience) dental assistants say they want to stay in the field for five or

more years. (7) Data for those with greater than two years of experience was not included in this report.

Expenses related to dental assistant turnover and unfilled positions negatively impact dental practices according to a 2023 survey of dentists, dental office managers, and dental practice administrators. (8) According to this research, nearly one in four practices decrease or reschedule patient visits when the dental assistant is out of office. (8) Researchers estimate that dental practices could experience up to a 6% decrease in daily revenue each day a dental assistant role is vacant, adding up to nearly \$110,000 over the course of a year. (8) On average, practices report that it takes an average of 2.5 months to fill a vacant dental assistant position, though the time to hire increases for rural and specialty practices. While dental assistant roles are vacant, their tasks are delegated to other staff including dentists. Despite having significantly higher labor costs, dentists take on about one-quarter of reassigned tasks. (8) Upon hiring a dental assistant, training time varies from one month for experienced dental assistants to up to 2.5 months for entry-level dental assistants. (8)

Certifications and career advancements

Different career and certification pathways exist to gain dental assistant certification in Oregon. Due to capacity constraints within OBD, dental assistant certification in Oregon is managed by DANB. (9) While Oregon dental assisting certificates do not require renewal, DANB does require that some certifications be renewed annually to maintain certification. (9) Certification renewal requires continuing education credits, maintaining CPR certification, and a renewal fee. (10) Additional certifications expand the responsibilities dental assistants are allowed to perform. Data related to whether or the degree to which additional

certifications translate to pay increases is not available. Table 1 compiles data from OBD and DANB on the certificates available to dental assistants.

Table 1. Dental Assisting Certificates

Certificate	Requires Prerequisite Certification	Allows Dental Assistant to...(11,12)
Radiological proficiency	No	Legally operate dental x-ray equipment and perform dental radiographic procedures under general supervision
Certified Dental Assistant	No	Administer fluoride, topical anesthetic, desensitizing agents, take impressions for diagnostics or appliances, operate dental x-ray equipment and perform dental radiographic procedures. Certified Dental Assistant exam includes the RHS, infection control exam (ICE), and the general chairside assisting exam (GC)
Expanded Function Dental Assistant	No	Perform expanded general duties such as coronal polishing, placing matrix bands, fitting and removing temporary crowns, placing and removing temporary restorations, removing excess supragingival cement, whitening, placing pit and fissure sealants, and soft denture relines under supervision
Restorative Functions certificate	Yes	Place, finish, and polish eligible restorations after the dentist prepares the tooth, except where Oregon rules restrict specific materials or procedures. Exam is administered by the American Board of Dental Examiners
Local Anesthesia Functions certificate	Yes	Administer local anesthetic under supervision
Orthodontic expanded functions	Yes	Performs expanded orthodontic duties, including placement and ligation of archwires, placement and removal of bands, brackets, and separators, and

		certain orthodontic appliance adjustments and removals under supervision
Preventive expanded functions	Yes	Performs preventive expanded functions such as coronal polishing and placement of pit and fissure sealants after completing required training and certification steps
Anesthesia Monitor	Yes	Monitor patients under various levels of sedation/anesthesia
Anesthesia Dental Assistant/ IV certificate	Yes	Support deep sedation/general anesthesia and IV initiation in dental settings

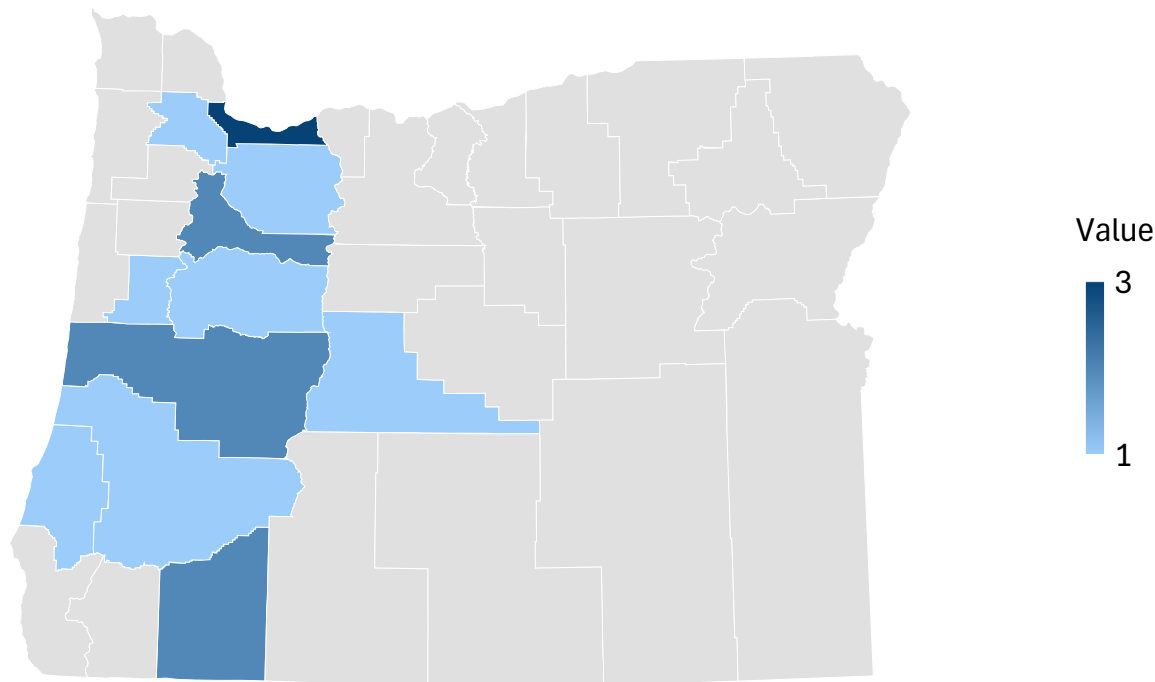
Training pathways

In Oregon, there are two primary pathways to becoming a dental assistant, dental assistant training programs and on-the-job training. (13) The first pathway of dental assistant training programs has traditionally been housed within community colleges, but there is an increasing number of private vocational programs opening across the state. Dental assisting training programs may decide to pursue accreditation by the American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), indicating an approved standard for dental-related education. (14) According to the Oregon Dental Assistant Association (ODAA), roughly one-third of dental assistants in the state received training through a CODA-accredited program. (15) In addition, there are some high school vocational training programs. However, due to data limitations, comprehensive analysis is not included in this report.

According to HECC, there are currently 16 active dental assistant programs in the state. (16) See Appendix B for a complete list of programs. Nine of the 16 programs are housed at community colleges and seven are private vocational programs. (16) All CODA-accredited programs in Oregon are at community

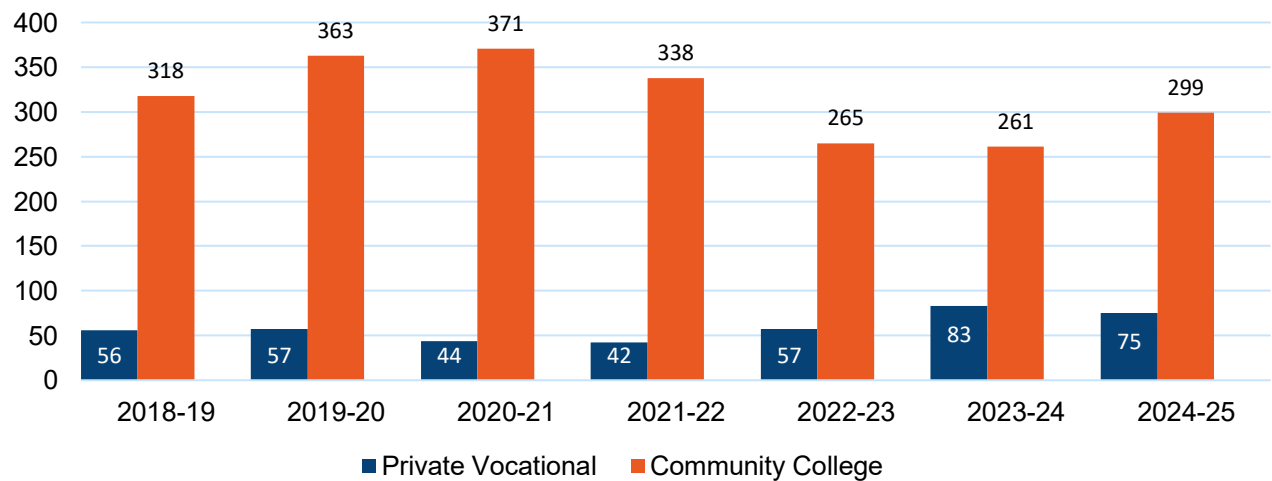
colleges. (17) Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of dental assistant programs, which are mostly in Oregon’s more densely populated areas.

Figure 1. Distribution of Dental Assisting Training Programs in Oregon



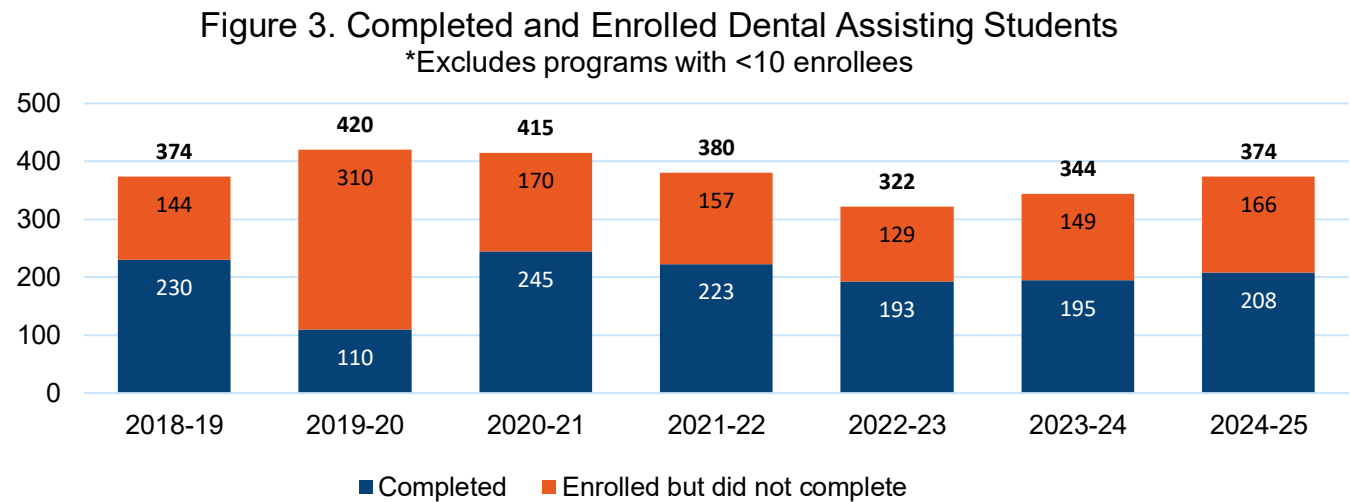
While private vocational programs are expanding, the majority of dental assistant students are enrolled in public programs at community colleges. (16) Figure 2

Figure 2. Enrollment Rates for Private Vocational Programs vs. Community College Programs
*Excludes programs with <10 enrollees



shows enrollment rates for private vocational programs and community college programs over the last seven academic years. Programs with less than 10 enrolled students were suppressed. (16)

Dental assisting programs report high levels of attrition in which enrolled students do not complete the program. (16) With the exception of the 2019-2020 academic year when the COVID-19 pandemic onset led to significantly lower completion rates, program completion rates have ranged between 57% and 64%. (16) Completion of a dental assisting program does not indicate a student is a Certified Dental Assistant, which requires passing the DANB exam. (11) See Figure 3 for the distribution of enrolled and completed students.



Appendix B details a complete list of active dental assistant training programs, including county, sector, CODA status, program duration, and approximate cost.

A second training pathway to becoming a dental assistant is through on-the-job training where a dental practice assumes responsibility for ensuring a dental assistant is equipped to perform their job duties. Despite the widespread use of on-the-job training, there are few resources available online describing the logistics and processes in which it occurs. (18) (See Dental Practice Perspectives below for more details on how practices in Oregon structure on-the-job training).

An article published by DANB in 2017 aimed at helping people decide between dental assisting school and on-the-job training describes how both pathways allow dental assistants to enter the field quickly, but the quality of on-the-job training depends on factors such as “finding the right dentist.”(18)

Currently, there is no available data in Oregon discussing the proportion of dental assistants who receive on-the-job training compared to formal training programs. Figure 2 on Page 10 shows that rural areas tend to have fewer available local training programs for dental assistants, which highlights the need for alternative training pathways. (19)

Resources for learning how to pursue on-the-job training as a means to becoming a dental assistant in Oregon are limited. For example, Multnomah County lists a Dental Assistant Training program for which no experience is needed under their job training opportunities webpage, but they are not currently accepting applications, and the existing link directs visitors to a job application page that requires an Expanded Function Dental Assistant certification. (20) Additionally, at the time of report publication, the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries lists one available apprenticeship which is not currently taking applications. (21,22)

Data sources and gaps

While this report includes existing dental assistant workforce data sources as outlined in Table 2 below, there are some important limitations in available information. No registry exists to document how many dental assistants currently work in Oregon or to collect diversity data such as demographic makeup or languages spoken. Unlike dentists and dental hygienists who are required to maintain their license with the state, dental assistants who are certified are only required to submit proof of certification to OBD once, producing a data gap of

who is currently practicing and length of careers. (2) The lack of a comprehensive registry of dental assistants produces other data gaps described in this report, such as the lack of data around wage variation depending on certification level and the inability to directly solicit information from dental assistants. Without a way to uniformly engage with dental assistants across the state, the closest available dental assisting data is proxy data by way of reports from dentists or dental practices.

Table 2. Oregon Dental Assistant Data Sources

Data Source/ Organization	Type of Data Collected	Data Collection Cadence	Limitations
Oregon Board of Dentistry (OBD)	Certification data for radiologic proficiency and expanded functions certifications	Ongoing	One-time certification that does not distinguish between actively practicing dental assistants and those not practicing, or those practicing in other states
	Select surveys in collaboration with OBD	2019, planned for 2026	Survey collects data from dentists and dental practices, not dental assistants
Dental Assisting National Board (DANB)	Certification data for radiologic proficiency and expanded functions certifications	Ongoing	Designed for credential verification, and does not show if certificate holder is currently practicing or practicing in other states
Oregon Employment Department	Wage ranges, job openings, and labor market indicators	Ongoing	Not a headcount source, describes labor market conditions
Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC)	Training program pipeline data: program capacity, enrollment, and completion rates	Annual	Measures program enrollment/ completion; does not measure on-the-job training

Dental assisting regulatory authorities

The Oregon Secretary of State details dental assisting regulations and authority in Chapter 818. ([12](#)) Table 3, below, maps the entities responsible for creating, authorizing, and implementing dental assisting regulations alongside their activities.

Table 3. Roles of Dental Assisting Regulatory Entities

Regulatory Authority	Activities
Oregon Secretary of State	Publishes the administrative rules (recommended by OBD) that govern dental assisting, including authorized expanded functions
Oregon Board of Dentistry (OBD)(12)	Administers Oregon Dental Practice Act; sets and enforces dental assisting rules, defines allowed functions, recognizes certification pathways, oversees standards for specialized certifications
Dental Assisting National Board (DANB)(23)	Administers certification processes on behalf of OBD
Oregon Dental Assistants Association (ODAA)	Represents dental assistants in legislative and professional matters, supports career development and professional
Oregon Dental Association (ODA)(24)	Represents dentists in Oregon through legislative advocacy; partners with ODAA to address workforce shortage and promote the profession
Dental assisting education programs	Delivers dental assisting curriculum
Dentists and dental practice owners	Hires and supervises dental assistants, endorses or verifies clinical experience for some certification pathways

Efforts to address workforce

In Oregon, significant efforts have been made to address the dental assistant workforce shortage by OBD, OHA, state programs, counties, Medicaid's coordinated care organizations (CCOs) and dental subcontractors, and academic institutions. Many of these initiatives intersect with Medicaid adequacy, and strengthening the dental assistant pipeline for Medicaid-focused clinics is essential to improving access. In Oregon's Medicaid managed care model, a CCO may contract with dental subcontractor to manage and deliver oral health benefits for its members.

In accordance with House Bill 3223 (2023), OBD established a new standing Advisory Committee named "Dental Assistant Workforce Shortage Advisory Committee (DAWSAC)" per Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS) 679.280. [\(25\)](#) The purpose of DAWSAC is to review, discuss, and make recommendations to the Oregon Board of Dentistry on addressing the workforce shortage. The committee is mandated to meet at least four times per year and is chaired by two members of the OBD Board as designated by the OBD President. Additional committee members include at least five individuals who have worked as a dental assistant in Oregon either currently or previously and one representative from each of the following associations: ODA, Oregon Dental Hygienist Association, and ODAA.

DAWSAC held its first meeting in October 2023 and has continued to meet quarterly since then. In addition to its legislative mandate to review requirements of dental assistant certification in other states, DAWSAC has reviewed Oregon employment data, as well as reports from state and national organizations such as the ADA and DANB, and heard from members of the dental assisting community on recommendations related to the dental assistant workforce shortage and strategies to address it.

In the three years since its inception, DAWSAC has produced several recommendations, including those for OBD and the Licensing, Standards and Competency Committee to review. DAWSAC actions as of December 2025 include recommendations to:

- Focus recruitment efforts on high schools and community colleges.
- Create a dental assistant registry (OBD is currently in contact with DANB and their licensing database provider regarding this recommendation).
- Allow dental assistants to administer nitrous oxide under direct supervision.
- Allow dental assistants who are Board approved radiologic proficiency instructors to sign off on proficiency.
- Allow dental assistants to become certified to perform phlebotomy services by completing a phlebotomy training course.
- Remove the requirement that the dental assistant possess a Certified Anesthesia Dental Assistant certificate to perform phlebotomy services.
- Conduct a survey like the 2019 Dental Assisting Questionnaire with additional questions about wages and certifications.
- Include dental assistant wage history information in a future OBD newsletter. ([26](#))

OHA and state agencies have programs that support development of the dental assistant workforce. First, OHA's Health Care Provider Incentive Program (HCPIP) has two incentives that support dental assistants. The HCPIP Loan Repayment program includes dental assistants as an eligible discipline. ([27](#)) Established by the Oregon Legislature through House Bill 3261 in 2017, the program is designed such that "in return for serving at an approved practice site, participants receive

funding to repay qualifying educational loans.” ([27](#), [28](#)) Eligible practice sites must meet the following criteria:

- Be located in a HPSA, have a Facility HPSA designation, serve in an underserved area or area of unmet need, OR
- Serve Medicaid and/or Medicare patients in a proportion equal to or greater than the county average, OR
- Provide essential health care services to an underserved population, as determined by the Oregon Health Authority, AND
- Have a valid Site Application on file with the Oregon Office of Rural Health, dated within the past 12 months and have received confirmation of site qualification. ([27](#))

Full-time providers who practice in an eligible setting:

- Must commit to a minimum 3-year service obligation, and
- Are eligible to receive 70% of their qualifying loan balance, up to \$50,000 per service year with more than \$29,000 in qualifying loan debt. ([27](#))

Awardees can apply multiple times until 100% of the balance owed on remaining qualifying loans is paid off. In addition, providers who have less than \$29,000 in qualifying loan debt may be eligible to receive the full amount. ([27](#)) Benefits for part-time providers are allocated at a lower amount.

In addition, HCPIP administers scholarships to students in health care professional education programs, including dental assisting. Health care education programs apply for an HCPIP grant to offer scholarships to their students. Since 2021, HCPIP awarded funding to five programs that offer chairside and/or didactic dental assistant training: Capitol Dental Care, Central Oregon Community College, Chemeketa Community College, Rogue Community

College, and Umpqua Community College. The scholarship grant opportunity will be available to health care education programs again in the 2025-27 biennium.

Similarly, the Healthy Oregon Workforce Training Opportunity Grant Program (HOWTO)—the second OHA program that supports dental assistants—is “intended to expand health professional training within the state to address current and future shortages in the health care workforce in rural and medically underserved areas of Oregon.” (29) HOWTO grantmaking is administered by OHA and OHSU under the policy direction of the Oregon Health Policy Board. (29) Through HOWTO, the following organizations have received funding to expand and diversify the dental assisting workforce:

- Clackamas Workforce Partnership (Oregon City): “project expands, develops, and increases the diversity of the local health workforce by supporting and enrolling Clackamas County residents, with a focus on the immigrant and refugee populations, into certified health programs such as certified nursing assistants, dental assistants, medical billing, and pharmacy technicians.” (29)
- Advantage Dental (Redmond): “project establishes an internal Dental Assistance Training Program to address statewide shortages while increasing the diversity of this workforce. This program will train dental assistants for dual roles as patient navigators, through Traditional Health Worker education.” (29)
- Clackamas Community College (Oregon City): “project develops a new dental program to offer alongside existing Career and Technical Education Day camps for high school students at Clackamas Community College. This camp will contribute to increasing the diversity of Oregon’s oral health care workforce by offering oral health care program scholarships for camp students to attend college.” (29)

- La Clinica (Medford): “project expands workplace learning programs to create workforce training pipeline that targets our Latine Community. The adaptable training program focuses on medical, dental, and behavioral health workforce. It will provide apprenticeship, internship/ preceptor opportunities, technical and workforce development training, internship stipends, scholarship support, coaching and mentoring.” (29)
- Oregon Academy of General Dentistry Foundation (Tigard): “project develops a Dental Assistant Training Program that provides two condensed and accelerated pathways into the field of dental assisting. The first is focused on high school seniors and the second is focused on community members.” (29)
- Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center (Aloha): “project will expand their workforce development program. This will increase workforce diversity in health care by covering the cost for staff, patients, and community members to become certified medical assistants, dental assistants, and pharmacy technicians. This program will cover the cost of training while also providing paid positions in the clinics while they are students.” (29)
- Willamette Dental Group (Hillsboro): “project establishes a Dental Assistant (DA) and uptraining DA training program. This program will recruit non-clinical staff and community to be trained as Dental Assistants in partnership with Portland Community College. DAs may also train to receive their Expanded Function Certification and be uptrained into a Restorative Dental Assistant Capacity with certification in addition to other specialties.” (29)
- Reynolds School District #7 (Fairview): “will create a Dental Assistant training program guided by an integrated career technical education

program design that includes internships and paid summer clinical experiences to help address financial barriers for students.” (29)

Another state-led effort to address workforce shortage in various health care fields including dental assisting is Future Ready Oregon, an “investment package [that] supports numerous workforce education and training programs and talent development strategies across the state.” (30) The grant funds are administered by three Oregon agencies, HECC, Bureau of Labor and Industries, and Youth Development Oregon. Since 2022, Future Ready Oregon grants have supported multiple dental assisting workforce projects including grants to the Boys & Girls Club of Albany, Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, Willamette Health Council, and OHSU Building Bridges to Health Care Careers. (29) Given the recent nature of these efforts, outcome data related to number of individuals trained is not currently available.

In addition to the statewide efforts, local counties, Medicaid’s CCOs, and academic institutions have initiated their own efforts. For example, Multnomah County signed a Memorandum of Agreement with Local 88 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO to “[plan] and [implement] a formal training program that can provide a pathway for County employees, clients and community members to become Dental Assistants” with potential funding from CareOregon. (31)

Dental practice perspectives and recommendations

Interviews showed that dental assisting shortages heavily impact practices serving Medicaid populations. Workforce strategies must emphasize Medicaid-serving settings. To explore how dental practices are approaching training, hiring and retaining dental assistants, OHA and OHSU co-created an interview guide to be used with dental practices across Oregon. The interview guide can be found in

Appendix C. OHA Health Care Workforce Initiatives staff led interviews while conducting site visits at dental practices in Curry, Jackson, Josephine, Lane and Klamath counties (n=7). Of the seven sites visited, three were private practices, two were Federally Qualified Health Centers, and two were dental subcontractors. Most interviews were conducted with high level administrative staff (n=5), and two interviews were conducted with owner-dentists.

Recruitment. Dental practices included in the interviews shared a variety of strategies that they used to recruit new dental assistants, including use of online job posting, outreach to high school students enrolled in early college courses, and partnerships with community colleges. Recruitment strategies that practices utilize are tailored to their specific area and resources available. The primary barriers cited were a lack of applicants and the burden on staff time to train new hires with limited experience.

Retention Challenges. With regard to challenges retaining the dental assistant workforce, interviewees reported that dental assistants often enter the field without formal training or experience and conclude that they don't enjoy the work. Interviewees also commented that some dental assistants leave for a career with more professional and financial growth opportunities, like dental hygiene. Additional challenges to retaining dental assistants included dental assisting being viewed as job rather than a career and difficulty ensuring that dental assistants feel valued in the practice.

Retention Strategies. Interviewees described efforts to maintain their dental assistant workforce. Interviewees pointed to a key factor contributing to staff retention: ensuring that dental assistants are integrated into the practice as decision-makers and treated with respect. In addition to creating a positive work environment, interviewees reported the importance of maintaining consistent

schedules that don't overload dental assistants, providing benefits such as health insurance and retirement, and implementing regular pay raises.

Experience and Training. Preferences related to prior training and education of dental assistants largely depended on practice size and capacity for training. Some large clinics have a structured in-house training program. One clinic described their comprehensive six-month training structure including a curriculum and rotation of training leads such that dental assistants are trained by both dentists and more experienced dental assistants. Practices report that one primary benefit of in-house training programs is they can introduce new individuals to the field and that dental assistants can be trained in the workflow and practices of the clinic. Other dental practices noted that they either subsidize training costs or provide loan forgiveness programs for dental assistants trained elsewhere.

Recommendations. The following are a summary of recommendations for improving the dental assistant workforce in Oregon made by the seven dental practices interviewed for this report:

- Increase the variety of training opportunities for dental assistants.
- Improve marketing and outreach efforts related to the profession.
- Formalize regional connections between community college programs and dental practices, including those serving Medicaid patients.
- Increase funding for dental assisting initiatives such as loan forgiveness programs for dental assistants; stipends to support dental assistant students while in training; and funding initiatives to assist with dental assistant recruitment.

Community college program perspectives and recommendations

As previously mentioned, roughly 80% of formally trained dental assistants were enrolled in a community college program during the 2024-2025 academic year. Given this, OHA and OHSU reached out to representatives from the nine community college programs to better understand program recruitment, program structure, and external collaborations. (16) OHA and OHSU developed an interview guide, and OHSU Evaluation Assistance Program conducted three interviews virtually. The interview guide can be found in Appendix D.

Recruitment and Enrollment. Staff from community colleges dental assisting programs described various ways they conduct outreach with potential students. Efforts include visiting high schools, offering clinic tours and hosting open houses for health sciences programs, and conducting direct outreach with students who applied but were not accepted into dental hygiene programs. They also cited the key role that dentists play in recruiting individuals into the field by conducting direct outreach to patients who may be interested in the profession and having brochures available in their waiting rooms. Despite robust recruitment efforts, some programs do not consistently fill their cohorts and experience attrition over the course of their programs (see Figure 2 for student enrollment and completion data for all dental assistant training programs).

Program Structure. All the people interviewed at community college programs were from full-time programs that followed the traditional academic calendar, September to May. Students engage in didactic and chairside learning as well as professional skills. In addition, community college pathways can intentionally place trainees in clinics serving Medicaid patients to improve access.

Dental Student Engagement. Dental assisting programs all incorporate chairside experiential learning, including through internships at dental practices. One community college also described a previous partnership between their dental assisting program and the OHSU School of Dentistry in which dental assisting students would travel to Portland and work chairside with 3rd and 4th year students. This relationship gave both dental assisting and dental students the opportunity to learn four-handed dentistry in which a dentist and dental assist work together. This learning program ended in 2023.

Team Dynamics and Role Clarity. A topic repeatedly raised by interviewees was the nature of the working relationship between dentists and dental assistants. Interviewees noted that, for dental assistants to be viewed as a vital part of the practice, dentists must understand how to effectively utilize them. Dental assistants are trained to support dentists through four-handed dentistry; however, if dentists are unfamiliar with this practice model or lack experience implementing it, assistants may not be fully utilized or recognized for their value.

Interviewees also reported concerns that some dentists may not fully understand the legal scope and certification limitations of dental assistants, resulting in assistants being asked to perform tasks outside their training or authorization. To support appropriate practice and effective team functioning, dentists should understand the scope of practice associated with each dental assistant's certification, which can vary significantly.

Recommendations. Following is a summary of recommendations for improving the dental assistant workforce in Oregon made by the representatives from community college training programs that were interviewed for this report.

- Increase education and communication with dental students/dentists to:
 - Ensure they know how to best utilize dental assistants; and

- Ensure that dentists are not asking dental assistants to practice outside their certification and legal scope.
- Inform dentists of the role they play in recruiting new dental assistants to the profession and provide them with the materials and information to facilitate that process.
- Develop clinical placements in practices serving Medicaid patients—such as Federally Qualified Health Centers, Rural Health Clinics, and clinics affiliated with CCO subcontractors—so that dental assistants gain exposure and may choose to work in those clinics after graduation.
- Improve data collection around dental assistant workforce to determine the extent to which there is a shortage and create mechanisms for directly reaching out to dental assistants across the state.
- Improve communication and collaboration between training programs (including those at community colleges and private vocational programs) and dental practices to align efforts to improve the workforce.

Conclusion

This report serves as a status update on work currently underway in Oregon to address the dental assisting workforce shortage. In particular, strengthening dental assistant workforce pipelines in Medicaid-serving clinics is essential to improving network adequacy. Efforts to address the shortage are shaped by both what is currently known and areas where data is still lacking. Current sources of information include surveys distributed by DANB, educational data from HECC, and wage and employment data from the Oregon Employment Department. In addition to describing findings from these sources, this report includes preliminary findings from a small sample of dental practices and community

colleges with training programs across the state. Taken together, the data in this report begins to highlight the dental assisting workforce in Oregon.

A limitation of this report is the lack of direct data from current or prospective dental assistant students and practicing dental assistants. This data was not included, given challenges of reaching these groups in a comprehensive way.

The following is a summary of cross-cutting recommendations made by DAWSAC, dental practices, and community colleges with training programs that were interviewed for this report. For each recommendation, the sources are cited.

- **Training Program Collaboration:** Strengthen relationships among private vocational training programs, community college programs, and dental practices to streamline education to workforce pathway (sources: dental practices, community college training programs).
- **Workforce Recruitment:** Improve recruitment efforts including using dentists and high schools and more general outreach about the profession (sources: DAWSAC, dental practices, community college programs).
- **Dental Assistant Registry:** Implement a dental assistant registry to assess the scale of workforce shortage, track credentials, and conduct outreach to dental assistants directly (sources: DAWSAC, community college training programs).
- **Career Growth:** Expand opportunities for career growth through additional certifications and expanded scope of practice (source: DAWSAC).
- **Compensation:** Improve data around dental assistant wages, ensure pay facilitates retention, and determine methods for pay parity among different dental sectors (sources: DAWSAC, dental practices).
- **Dental Assistant Utilization:** Conduct outreach with dentists to improve awareness around the professional scope of dental assistants in Oregon

and how to fully utilize them in practice (source: community college training programs).

- **Funding for Workforce Development and Retention:** Increase funding for dental assisting initiatives such as loan forgiveness programs; stipends to support students while in training; and funding initiatives to assist with recruitment (source: dental practices).

Robust efforts to address the dental assisting workforce shortage in Oregon are ongoing. By addressing the recommendations made by knowledgeable partners in this report, Oregon can continue to support and improve this workforce.

Health Policy and Analytics Division

Health Care Workforce Initiatives

500 Summer St. NE

Salem, OR 97301

503-385-3075

<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/HPA/DSI/Pages/Clinical-Supports-Integration-Workforce.aspx>



Citations

1. State of Oregon. Dental Practice Act. ORS Chapter 679 Dentists and Dental Therapists, ORS Chapter 680.010 to 680.210 and 680.990 Dental Hygienists, Other Related Statutes, Oregon Administrative Rules Chapter 818. 2025 Dec 1.
2. Oregon Board of Dentistry: Dental Assistants [Internet]. Oregon Board of Dentistry. Available from: <https://www.oregon.gov/dentistry/Pages/dental-assistants.aspx>
3. Occupational Profiles: Dental Assistants [Internet]. State of Oregon Employment Department. Available. Available from: https://www.qualityinfo.org/jc-oprof?occProfSearchTerm=319091&occProfSearchResults=319091&occProfAreas=4101000000&occprof_RptType=0&occProfName=&occProfJSID=&expandedState=0111111111000&oedPageNumber=2&hwolPageNumber=undefined
4. Kracher C, Breen C, McMahon K, Gagliardi L, Miyasaki C, Landsberg K, et al. The Evolution of the Dental Assisting Profession. J Dent Educ. 2017 Sep;81(9):eS30–7. doi:10.21815/JDE.017.031 PubMed PMID: 28864801.
5. 2023 Dental Workforce Budget Request. Oregon Dental Association; 2023.
6. Dental workforce shortages: Data to navigate today's labor market [Internet]. ADA Health Policy Institute in collaboration with American Dental Assistants Association, American Dental Hygienists' Association, Dental Assisting National Board, and IgniteDA; 2022. Available from: https://www.ada.org/-/media/project/ada-organization/ada/ada-org/files/resources/research/hpi/dental_workforce_shortages_labor_market.pdf
7. Dental Assistant Workforce Facts and Insights for Employers [Internet]. Dental Assisting National Board; 2024. Available from: https://danbsfprodassets.azureedge.net/assets/docs/default-source/marketing-and-surveys/2024-employer-insights-salary-survey.pdf?sfvrsn=534162b0_3
8. Financial Impact of Dental Assistants on the Dental Practice [Internet]. Dental Assisting National Board and The DALE Foundation; 2023. Available from: https://danbsfprodassets.azureedge.net/assets/docs/default-source/marketing-and-surveys/financial-impact-of-dental-assistants.pdf?sfvrsn=c24edb36_1

9. Dental Assisting Frequently Asked Questions [Internet]. Oregon Board of Dentistry. Available from:
<https://www.oregon.gov/dentistry/Documents/Dental%20Assisting%20FAQ.pdf>
10. Renew Certification [Internet]. Dental Assisting National Board. Available from:
<https://www.danb.org/certification/renew>
11. Oregon Dental Assistant Requirements [Internet]. Dental Assisting National Board. Available from: <https://www.danb.org/state-requirements/detail/oregon-state-requirements>
12. Oregon Board of Dentistry. 818-042-0010 [Internet]. Available from:
<https://secure.sos.state.or.us/oard/viewSingleRule.action?ruleVrsnRsn=318449>
13. Become a Dental Assistant in Oregon [Internet]. Oregon Dental Assistants Association. Available from: <https://www.oregondentalassistants.com/become-a-dental-assistant-in-oregon>
14. An Introduction to CODA [Internet]. Commission of Dental Accreditation. Available from: <https://coda.ada.org/about-coda>
15. July 17, 2024- Public Packet DAWSAC [Internet]. State of Oregon Board of Dentistry; 2024 Jul. Available from:
<https://www.oregon.gov/dentistry/Documents/July%2017%2c%202024%20DAWSAC%20Meeting%20Packet.pdf>
16. Higher Education Coordinating Commission, State of Oregon. CIP 51.0601 data.
17. Search for Dental Programs [Internet]. Commission on Dental Accreditation. Available from: <https://coda.ada.org/find-a-program/search-dental-programs#sort=%40codastatecitysort%20ascending&f:ProgramType=>
18. On-the-job training vs. dental assisting school [Internet]. Dental Assisting National Board; 2017. Available from: <https://www.danb.org/news-blog/detail/blog/on-the-job-training-vs.-dental-assisting-school>
19. Workforce Model – Rural Oral Health Toolkit [Internet]. Rural Health Information Hub; 2025. Available. Available from:
<https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/oral-health/2/workforce-model>

20. Job training opportunities [Internet]. Multnomah County Community Health Center. Available from: <https://healthcenter.multco.us/about-us/careers/job-training-opportunities#1086-dental-assistant-training>
21. Dental Assistant Apprenticeship Opportunities [Internet]. Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries. Available from: <https://www.oregon.gov/boli/apprenticeship/pages/trade-details.aspx?trade=Dental%20Assistant>
22. Training Programs through One Community Health [Internet]. One Community Health. Available from: <https://www.onecommunityhealth.org/training-programs/>
23. 2026 Oregon EFDA Certificate Application Packet [Internet]. Dental Assisting National Board. Available from: https://danbsfprodassets.azureedge.net/assets/docs/default-source/state-application-packets/or_efda_2_3.pdf?sfvrsn=2c099a08_3
24. Oregon Dental Association: About Us [Internet]. Oregon Dental Association. Available from: <https://www.oregondental.org/about-us>
25. Pham H, Javadi, Gelser Blouin, Manning Jr, Levy E, Campos. House Bill 3223.
26. DAWSAC Meeting Packet 12.9.2025 [Internet]. State of Oregon Board of Dentistry; 2025 Dec. Available from: <https://www.oregon.gov/dentistry/Documents/DAWSAC%20Meeting%20Packet%2012.9.2025.pdf>
27. Oregon Office of Rural Health. Oregon Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Program [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.ohsu.edu/oregon-office-of-rural-health/oregon-health-care-provider-loan-repayment-program>
28. Oregon Health Authority [Internet]. Health Care Provider Incentive Program. Available from: <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/hpa/hp-pco/pages/hc-provider-incentive.aspx>
29. Oregon Health Authority [Internet]. Healthy Oregon Workforce Training Opportunity Grant. Available from: <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/hpa/hp-pco/pages/howto-grant-program.aspx>

30. Higher Education Coordinating Commission [Internet]. State of Oregon. Future Ready Oregon- Program Overview. Available from:
<https://www.oregon.gov/highered/about/pages/future-ready-about.aspx>
31. Memorandum of Agreement Expanded Functions Dental Assistant Pilot Training Program [Internet]. Multnomah County Health Department. Available from:
https://multco.us/file/moa_-_loal_88_efda_pilot_training_program_2023.11.01/download#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20shortage%20of,in%20pursuing%20this%20career%20path.

Appendix A. Table of abbreviations

ADA	American Dental Association
CODA	Commission on Dental Accreditation
CCO	Coordinated Care Organization
DANB	Dental Assisting National Board
DAWSAC	Dental Assistant Workforce Shortage Advisory Committee
Dental HPSA	Dental Health Professional Shortage Area
HECC	Higher Education Coordinating Commission
HOWTO	Healthy Oregon Workforce Training Opportunity Grant Program
OBD	Oregon Board of Dentistry
OCTRI	Oregon Clinical and Translational Research Institute
ODA	Oregon Dental Association
ODAA	Oregon Dental Assistant Association
OHA	Oregon Health Authority
OHSU	Oregon Health & Science University
ORS	Oregon Revised Statutes

Appendix B. Oregon dental assistant training programs

Program Name	County	Sector	CODA	Notes	Duration	Estimated Program Cost
Central Oregon Community College	Deschutes	Public	Yes	Full-time program; three prerequisite courses	9 months	\$10,655
Chemeketa Community College	Marion	Public	Yes	Full-time program; must be an active, credit-seeking student at time of application	9 months	\$10,715
Clackamas Community College	Clackamas	Public	No	Full-time program; three prerequisite courses	9 months	\$9,457-\$9,741
Lane Community College	Lane	Public	Yes	Full-time program; three prerequisite courses	9 months	\$15,476
Linn-Benton Community College	Linn	Public	Yes	Full-time program; one prerequisite courses	1 year	\$11,000
Portland Community College	Multnomah	Public	Yes	Full-time program; three prerequisite courses; 12 prerequisite hours of approved experience at dental clinic	9 months	\$10,474
Rogue Community College	Jackson	Public	No	Full-time program; six prerequisite courses; available at two campuses	9 months	unknown
Southwestern Oregon Community College	Coos	Public	No	Full-time program; two prerequisite courses	9 months	unknown

Umpqua Community College	Douglas	Public	Yes	Full-time program; three prerequisite courses	9 months	\$8,502
Accelerated Assisting of Gresham	Multnomah	Private	No	Hybrid program; 24 lecture hours, 72 laboratory hours, 50 hours of patient clinical training; 80 hours of externship with a local practice	12 weeks	\$5,508
Accelerated Assisting of Hillsboro	Washington	Private	No	Hybrid program; 24 lecture hours, 72 laboratory hours, 50 hours of patient clinical training; 80 hours of externship with a local practice	12 weeks	\$5,508
Accelerated Assisting of Portland	Multnomah	Private	No	Hybrid program; 24 lecture hours, 72 laboratory hours, 50 hours of patient clinical training; 80 hours of externship with a local practice	12 weeks	\$5,508
Cascade Dental Academy	Marion	Private	No	7 hours a week	14 weeks	\$7,950
Practical Dental Assisting of Oregon, LLC	Benton	Private	No	9-4 once a week; three cohorts a year (January, April, September)	14 weeks	\$8,350
Southern Oregon Dental Assistant Education	Jackson	Private	No	Classes in evenings and some Saturday labs	8 months	\$7,100
McKenzie Dental Practices of Oregon	Lane	Private	No	Online coursework with one in person 8-hour lab session a week; two terms a year	4 months	\$12,500

Appendix C. Dental practice interview guide

Interviewee:

Practice:

Date:

Goal: Understand barriers and facilitators to expanding of Oregon's dental assistant workforce.

Interview Questions

- To start, can you tell me a little about your clinic?
 - Where is the clinic located?
 - How many dentists, hygienists, and assistants do you employ?
 - Do you accept OHP?
- In terms of recruitment, what strategies do you use when trying to hire new DAs?
 - What has been the most effective hiring practice?
 - What barriers do you encounter with DA recruitment?
- What has been your experience with retaining dental assistants?
 - What reasons do you see for why dental assistants leave (other DA jobs v other profession v leaving workforce)
 - What barriers do you encounter related to retaining DAs?
 - What has been successful in terms of keeping DAs?
- Where did your DAs receive their education/training (on job v cc v private training program)?

- When hiring DAs, what educational preferences do you have? Why?
- Do you provide training for individuals to become DAs?
- If so, can you describe how you train DAs?
 - Do you follow an established curriculum?
 - Is the material you cover developed by the practice or sourced from somewhere else?
 - Who is responsible for training DAs?
 - What benefits do you see from providing training in house
 - What are some of the drawbacks of training in-house?
- Does your practice subsidize the cost for any DA trainings/certifications?
- What type of relationship does your practice have with formal DA training programs?
- What are the main areas that need to be addressed to rectify the DA shortage in OR/ in your local community?
- What recommendations do you have for addressing it?

Appendix D. Community college program interview guide

Interviewee:

Institution:

Date:

Goal: Understand barriers and facilitators to expanding of Oregon's dental assistant workforce.

Interview Questions

- To start, can you tell me a little bit about your program.
 - How many students do you enroll each term?
 - How does that compare to the program's capacity?
 - What is the program structure?
- What does recruitment look like for your program?
 - What kinds of strategies do you use?
 - What challenges do you encounter with recruitment
 - What do you hear from students as far as motivations for enrolling?
 - How do students hear about your program?
 - What opportunities do you see for increasing enrollment in your program?
- What type of tracking of graduates does you have in place?
 - Employment or certifications? Long term tracking?
- We are interested in learning more about how the different forms of dental assistant training impact community colleges (both on the job training and

private vocational programs). Can you share a little about your experience with this other training modes and the impact on community college programs?

- What do you think needs to happen to address dental assistant workforce shortage more broadly?
- Other thoughts/comments on the future of dental assistants in Oregon?