Up-and-Comers

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Cutting Their Teeth: University of Iowa Dental Hygiene Program and Sexism in Academia

By Beatrice Kearns, Graduate Assistant, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa

I have always been drawn to history. I dressed as Laura Ingalls for Halloween, read every book about Elizabeth Blackwell I could find, and wanted to know about the world my American Girl doll lived in. This led me to study history at Drake University, with a particular focus on women's perspectives. I knew I wanted to continue focusing on women's history as I began studying at the University of Iowa (UI) School of Library and Information Science. Through my time as a graduate assistant at the Iowa Women's Archives (IWA), I have had the opportunity to remain focused on women's experiences. At the end of my first semester of library school, I was looking for a quick addition to process to wrap up my year. I found a two-and-a-half-inch box from the dental hygiene program, whose records are held in the Iowa Women's Archives. After looking at the collection, I quickly realized that this addition was a piece in a much larger narrative.

Seal of the dental hygiene program, used from 1953 to 1985 (UIDH Program Records, IWA, UI Libraries, Box 44)

The University of Iowa Dental Hygiene Program Records document the fewer than 50-year life of an industry-leading educational institution. The University of Iowa Dental Hygiene (UIDH) program was housed within the College of Dentistry (COD), where women faculty led a largely female student body. The first students entered the program in 1949. The department was controversially shut down, and its final class graduated in 1995. The women of this department fought back against the closure through a lawsuit claiming gender discrimination, bringing the tumultuous relationship between the UIDH and the COD to light. I was drawn to this story immediately, told by the UIDH Records, and the *Brine, Pelton, and Thompson v. The University of Iowa* Records, which document the lawsuit.

The dental profession was facing rapid changes and a dramatic shortage in the second half of the twentieth century. To alleviate the burden on dentists, the idea of hygienists performing a broader range of procedures was proposed as a possible solution by some in the industry, with studies beginning in the 1960s. This had the potential to make a significant change, because at any given dental practice, hygienists greatly outnumbered dentists. The UIDH moved forward with the Experimental Expanded Function Study in 1969, during which hygiene students and dental students performed procedures to see if they had comparable skill levels. Several other studies had been conducted at other institutions, finding that hygienists were capable of doing much more. The introduction of the study at UI states that its purpose was to help "increase the availability of dental care by increasing the efficiency of dentists." As I read through the materials in the collection related to this study, I began to understand how integral hygienists' work is to oral and public health. However, this also brought the tensions between dentists and hygienists to light. The relationship between dentists and hygienists has historically been hierarchical, with dentists holding much of the power. This study discussed transitioning hygienists into the oral health equivalent of physician assistant. Dental hygiene students were selected to participate in the study based on academic performance and took courses that aligned with the procedures they would be evaluated on, such as anesthesiology, periodontics, and neck dissection labs. Students stated that these classes made them feel more prepared and

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provided a well-rounded perspective on oral health. The results of this study showed that dental hygiene students and dental students performed the procedures without significant differences in quality or time.

Hygiene student and dental student collaborating on a procedure, c. 1960s (UIDH Program Records, IWA, UI Libraries, Box 44)

Despite the UIDH conducting industry-shifting research, it faced a lot of challenges within the College of Dentistry. The department worked to transform students into professional clinical health-care providers. The department engaged in community outreach as well, hosting clinics and field trips for young children and providing mouth guards for local youth soccer programs. However, the COD and local dentist offices were frustrated that this outreach program took away from their potential patient (and profit) pool. The COD was loyal to the Iowa City–area dental practices and tried to make the mouth-guard program more difficult for the hygienists; the program was part of a grant to research preventative care, and the COD did not want to renew the grant. The UIDH struggled to nail down its position within the larger College of Dentistry, being referred to as both a program and a department depending on what was more convenient for the COD. Hygiene students were left out of collegewide communication, having to play catch-up in their classes when dental students had already been briefed.

The University of Iowa faced budget cuts in the late 1980s, and the Board of Regents identified the UIDH as a program to evaluate for closure. Three faculty members, Pauline Brine, Beth Pelton, and Nancy Thompson, filed a discrimination lawsuit against the university in 1991 following the recommendation of closure. Students rallied around their program, making T-shirts with a hygienist holding an oversized dental probe in a tank with the phrase "OPERATION: DENTAL HYGIENE '91" and wearing them around campus. The Board of Regents selected several other programs for closure: home economics, social work, child development and behavior, library science, and human nutrition, all based on similar evaluations. Some programs that survived the cuts remain dominated by women, such as library science and social work. All of these programs were historically female, and the university had concerns that women were not entering male-dominated programs such as medicine and economics because of the presence of female-dominated programs. This opinion was not shared by all. In fact, one regent, Mary Williams, had fiery words in response to this argument, explaining that the existence of historically female programs did not deter women from entering fields of study such as law or dentistry, but rather that the "systematic exclusion of women by the gatekeepers" was preventing women from entering these fields. The attorney and plaintiffs wore their "OPERATION: DENTAL HYGIENE '91" shirts to the trial.

*T-shirt made by the UIDH to raise awareness about their fight to save the program, 1991 (*Brine, Pelton, and Thompson v. The University of Iowa *Records, IWA, UI Libraries, Box 27)*

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Students wearing "OPERATION: DENTAL HYGIENE" T-shirts in front of the dental science building (UIDH Program Records, IWA, UI Libraries, Box 44)

In the lawsuit, sexist behavior was presented as evidence of gender discrimination. Within the COD, the hygiene students and faculty were not treated as equal to the dental students and faculty. The female faculty were called "Ms." instead of "Dr." in correspondence and discussion, told they were hysterical, and faced pay discrepancies. Despite being enrolled in the same courses, dental hygiene students were instructed not to participate in certain exams or labs. They were given the derogatory moniker of "genies" by dental students and by instructors in front of classes. Reading through memoranda and other correspondence between faculty and students about their mistreatment was extremely difficult and frustrating. I was struck by how recently this blatant and vicious sexism was present on this campus.

In broader discussion of dental hygiene education, the University of Iowa was not in a unique position. Many other institutions across the nation were considering closing their dental hygiene programs. Despite the fact that the US Bureau of Labor Statistics demonstrated a growing need for hygienists and a shortage of dentists, schools looked to hygiene programs to cut budgets. Institutions such as the University of Washington and Marquette University contacted the UIDH as experts on the importance of dental hygiene education. Many of these programs closed, most of them also filled with women students and faculty.

The conflict over the closure of the dental hygiene program at the University of Iowa did not exist in a bubble, but rather as a part of a broader trend of discrimination against women at UI. In 1990, after a five-year legal battle, Dr. Jean Jew won a lawsuit against the University of Iowa for sexual harassment. Jew was a professor in the anatomy department in the College of Medicine who endured a hostile work environment and was denied promotion because she was a woman. The university community rallied around Jew, forming the Jean Jew Justice Committee, which focused on engaging the public in discussions around sexual harassment in academia. The Department of Home Economics, another program dominated by female students and faculty, was discontinued in 1991. The home economics department was viewed as a logical candidate for budget cuts because of its old-fashioned nature, despite its strong reputation. Women on the University of Iowa campus expressed feelings of hopelessness when it came to the state of discrimination and harassment. The UI Council on the Status of Women performed a survey and found that many women felt that reporting any issues was useless or that it would cause them negative consequences. The story of the UIDH captures pieces of all of these concerns around campus.

Dental hygiene students studying, c. 1990s (UIDH Program Records, IWA, UI Libraries, Box 44)

The legacy of the dental hygiene program shows the importance of putting women's perspectives first. Their records are preserved in the Iowa Women's Archives, which was in its infancy when the UIDH's final class graduated in 1995, but it was important to them that their records were held in a space dedicated to women rather than to the university. These records have guided me through so many other collections held in IWA, demonstrating that each collection is a piece in the bigger picture of the history of Iowa women.