



Student Debt and Loan Repayment

Student debt is considered by many stakeholders to be the next great threat to the American financial system as the average U.S. student loan debt and delinquency rates have increased significantly over the last decade.ⁱ Individuals such as oral and maxillofacial surgeons (OMSs), who enter fields that require postgraduate education and training, face excessive financial burdens. By the time many OMSs enter the workforce, they have accumulated more than \$400,000 in student debt.

The American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (AAOMS) maintains that educational debt plays a large role in postgraduate career planning that has implications for OMS patients, our country's healthcare system, and the future of the specialty and the nation's economy. According to the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), more than half of dental school seniors graduating in 2016 said the perceived impact of educational debt influenced their decision to go into private practice immediately after graduation rather than pursuing careers in public service, academia and/or research.ⁱⁱ

The United States has significant areas of underserved populations across the country. Despite this, resident OMSs may be deterred from practicing in underserved areas in favor of more lucrative metropolitan areas because they may believe underserved areas will not offer enough compensation to offset the cost of paying down their debt. This is equally true for those considering careers in academia and research. Such decisions leave patients in underserved areas without access to care and the specialty at risk of too few faculty to train future OMSs and researchers to develop new treatment modalities. Additionally, OMSs with large student debt burdens may feel discouraged from buying a home, starting a family or buying into a practice as their ability to afford such things is questionable when compared to the significant amount of debt they also must pay off.

Capping Loan Payments and Income-based Repayment Models

Student loan defaults and delinquencies frequently occur when a borrower's income does not match up with their student loan payments. This is illustrative of the typical OMS, who is tasked with repaying more money than can be afforded within a given timeframe.

Capping student loan payments at a reasonable percentage of a borrower's current salary and the use of income-based repayment (IBR) models can offer solutions to this problem as they decrease the chances of a borrower becoming delinquent or defaulting on their loan(s). This saves OMS borrowers – and all other taxpayers – money because IBR models not only allow loans to be paid back at a rate that properly matches income level but also make the loan repayment process easier for borrowers.

Halt Interest Accrual While in Forbearance or Deferment

Due to the low salaries earned during medical or dental residency training, the federal government allows such borrowers to qualify for loan deferment or forbearance while they are in a medical or dental residency. This means they are not obligated to make loan payments during this period. Because all graduate loans are unsubsidized, however, borrowers continue to accrue interest on their loans during the deferment/forbearance period. A typical OMS goes through a four-year residency program and if the average OMS has \$350,000 in unsubsidized student loans after completing dental school at the current average graduate loan interest rate of 6 percent, **they will pay more than \$90,000 of additional interest during their four years in residency.** AAOMS supports legislation that would halt interest accrual while loans are in forbearance or deferment for those who qualify under the internship/residency category of either of these payment delay options.

Loan Forgiveness

Many existing student loan forgiveness programs for OMSs choosing careers in public service and research are not enticing. Those such as the federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness Programⁱⁱⁱ require too many consecutive years of repayment before forgiveness of the remaining loan balance is triggered and, typically, the actual amount of money forgiven is insignificant.

Therefore, it is the position of AAOMS that if student loan repayment models offer borrowers loan forgiveness after either 1) a specified amount of years in good repayment standing or 2) for practicing in underserved areas/making a specific percentage of their practice comprised of underserved populations, then loan forgiveness should occur earlier in the repayment process – thereby removing the fear of OMS borrowers of inadequate income while practicing in underserved areas or in academic settings.

Fixing and Refinancing Student Loan Interest Rates; Consolidating Loans

Many OMSs with immense student loan debt have multiple student loans that each accrue interest at very high rates. On average, these rates fall within the range of 6 to 8 percent. Some of these loan rates are variable, declining or increasing based on market forces outside of borrower control. In such cases, it is often the accrued interest that makes repayment overwhelming. AAOMS supports student loan repayment reforms that guarantee 1) fixed student loan interest rates, 2) the capacity to refinance high interest rates (including multiple refinancing over the duration of the loan's repayment) and 3) the ability to consolidate multiple (including private) loans. Fixing interest rates prevents borrowers from paying interest amounts they likely did not agree to at their loan's outset. Additionally, the ability to consolidate multiple loans and refinance the interest rate allows borrowers to repay loans more quickly and easily. OMS borrowers who avoid unmanageable interest rates and the duty to repay several loans simultaneously are more likely to practice in underserved areas, render pro bono services, offer an expanded scope of procedures and enhanced patient care, buy a home, have children and help stimulate the national economy.



Tax Deductions on Student Loan Interest

The federal government presently allows student loan borrowers whose income does not exceed a certain threshold to deduct a maximum of \$2,500 from their taxes each year due to the interest that accrued over that duration on their student loan(s). However, this deduction is not sufficient to equitably offset most OMS borrowers' debt burden. This is compounded by the fact that many OMS student loans have extraordinarily high interest rates. For these reasons, AAOMS supports allowing OMS borrowers to claim a greater, and thus more impactful, tax deduction on their student loan interest.

Conclusion

Better controlling healthcare costs and maintaining access to well-qualified healthcare providers requires that we reduce the student loan debt burden faced by those providers as they enter the workforce. Student loan debt reform would promote a more robust healthcare system and positively influence OMS patient care, the future of the specialty and our nation's economy.

References:

- i *Greenstone, M. and Looney, A. Rising Student Debt Burdens: Factors Behind the Phenomenon. Brookings Institution online, July 5, 2013.*
- ii *Annual ADEA Survey of Dental School Seniors, 2016 Graduating Class: Table 24. Seniors' immediate plans after graduation by level of education debt.*
- iii *U.S. Department of Education. Federal Student Aid, Loan Forgiveness for Public Service Employees. Available at: <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sites/default/files/public-service-loan-forgiveness.pdf>. Accessed March 1, 2015.*

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