The number of dental schools in the U.S. steadily increased from the 1950s into the 1980s, reaching a then-peak of 60. A wave of closures occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since 1997, there has been a net gain of 12 dental schools (13 opened and one closed), bringing the current total to 66. Ten of these 13 new schools have opened since 2008.

First-year enrollment decreased during the 1980s, after reaching a high at the time of 6,030 in 1980. Since 1990, first-year enrollment has increased nearly every year. Although much of the surge has been driven by the 13 new dental schools that opened since 1997, they did not contribute to the entire gain; first-year enrollment also increased by almost 900 students at the 53 established dental schools since 2000.

Average educational indebtedness of all graduating dental students has increased an average of 3.48% annually between 2000 and 2018 after adjusting for inflation.

The percentage of dental school applicants accepted followed a wave-like pattern between 1980 and 2018.

Female and under-represented minority* (URM) first-year dental students as a percentage of enrollment nearly doubled during the 1980s. Since 1990, the percentage of female students has increased at a much slower pace, while the percentage of URM students has fluctuated. In 2018 female dental students outnumbered male students for the first time.

* Includes students who identify as Black or African-American, Hispanic or Latino, or American Indian or Alaskan Native.

For more information, visit ADA.org/HPI or contact the Health Policy Institute at hpi@ada.org.