

Growing the Dietetics Profession via a Mentorship Program Between Dietitians and Dietetics Students

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In many undergraduate dietetics programs, there are limited mentoring programs outside of the classrooms for students. We describe the development and evaluation of a project that connected dietetics students to Registered Dietitian Nutritionist mentors in the community. An online survey provided project descriptions available to dietetics students, where they ranked the Registered Dietitian Nutritionists they wanted to be matched with for the experience. Mentor-mentee matches resulted in positive improvements; students reported that they had gained knowledge and improved skills and dietitians cultivated leadership skills. Such project-based mentoring programs can connect students to practicing professionals, providing hands-on field experience. *Nutr Today*. 2018;53(2):89–91

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is a mutual relationship in which both parties use reflective practice and therapeutic communication techniques to develop new skills, broaden knowledge, and foster healthy attitudes of both parties.^{1,2} Mentors can support, guide, teach, and be used as resources for their mentees to enhance the learning experience and practical application in dietetics.¹ A successful mentor should be able to assist the mentee to interpret knowledge and experience to guide the mentee towards an independent and self-sufficient professional.³

A supportive and encouraging mentor can pave the way for mentee successes. Mentorship is a vital component in the healthcare professions, such as nutrition and dietetics.^{4,5} Mentoring is recognized by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics as important for both mentees and Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) mentors.⁶ The Academy promotes its “eMentoring Program,” an online program designed to

connect Academy mentors to mentees to engage communication among dietetics professionals. Several state and local dietetics associations have their own mentoring opportunities for dietitians to mentor aspiring RDNs.^{6,7} In 2013, only 50% of undergraduates in dietetics were matched and obtained a dietetic internship (DI), indicating that students could use additional activities to improve their chances of matching.⁸ The Academy encourages DI applicants to “stand out,” by becoming actively involved in professional organizations and volunteering in areas related to nutrition in health.⁹ Incorporation of mentoring programs for Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) students provides an opportunity to practice acting as professionals and improve their communication skills prior to applying to an internship. Working with a practicing RDN helps students to more fully understand the dietetics field and develop the skills they will need as a professional.

At California State University, Northridge, a peer mentorship program paired up current dietetic interns and underrepresented DPD students interested in becoming an RDN, resulting in an increased number of minority students who were matched to a DI.⁶ Hands-on professional experiences helped students display greater comfort and ease in patient care settings and enhanced communication skills.¹⁰ One mentee in another mentoring program felt that she developed at a faster rate as an RDN than those without the mentor support.¹¹ A program at the University of Delaware paired senior DPD students to new DPD students; it increased both leadership and communications. Mentoring can be an effective method to enrich students’ learning and future career plans.¹²

The program we describe was a project-based mentorship program between RDNs and DPD students, designed to increase students’ knowledge to skill application, have a positive impact on the RDNs leadership, and to increase the number of students accepted to DIs.

METHODS

This program was started by the Mid-East Texas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (METAND) in January 2016. The program coordinator sent out an e-mail to the METAND and DPD listserves, in addition to being announced at meetings to advertise for the new program to urge mentors and

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mentees to volunteer. Since this was a project-based mentoring program, a variety of examples were given to assist the mentor RDNs with electing their project idea that they wanted to work on with students. Table 1 shows the specific expectations and roles for mentors and mentees.

The RDNs who volunteered to be mentors for the program completed an online Qualtrics survey, which requested they provide name, e-mail, credentials, job title, a project concept, and communication/meeting preferences. Applications were then open to students, which included concise descriptions of RDNs projects along with expectations, and they ranked their top 3 interests. Mentorship pairs were then established by the program coordinator, based on rankings completed by students in their application as well as, to an extent, considerations of qualifications required by RDNs. The mentor and mentee were then introduced via e-mail, sent by the program coordinator, and urged to meet at least once monthly by telephone or in-person and to notify the program coordinator immediately if the pairing did not work out.

After the program, a survey was sent out to mentees and mentors to obtain feedback from the program to assist in the future development of the program. Questions were as follows: (1) How did you hear of the program? (2) Do you feel like you benefited from the program? And (3)

What is 1 concept that you took away from the program? In addition to the survey, feedback was taken from both groups. Another follow-up was done a year later by the program director. This study was approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB2016-0574D).

RESULTS

There were 17 mentorship pair matches (n = 25) established for the METAND Mentorship program, with some mentors having more than 1 mentee (as per RDN request). Two mentees dropped out of the program because of unexpected school and work responsibilities, leaving 23 completers of the program.

Most of the participants had heard of the program via e-mail, and a few found out by word of mouth. All participants felt that they benefited from the program in some way, but concepts learned varied. Mentees and mentors alike were happy to be a part of the program and felt that it contributed to their development as nutrition professionals. Students led many of their own projects while being supervised by their mentors. A selective sample of feedback and project descriptions is described in Table 2.

At 1 year, a follow-up was conducted with the 15 students who participated and completed the program. Of the 15 DPD students who completed the program, 5 matched to a DI, 6 matched to a DI and master of science combined program, and others were still enrolled in the undergraduate curriculum or no response to the follow-up attempt.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, feedback obtained by participants suggested that the program was beneficial to both mentor and mentee. The DPD students believed that this program provided real-life application of nutrition concepts, improved their communication skills, and contributed to their DI application. Equivocally, benefits for the mentor involved valuable leadership experiences and enhanced communication skills. There are several limitations to this case study. They included lack of strong theoretical framework, using a convenience sampling method and limited follow up. Aspects of the transformative learning theory were utilized to promote changes in knowledge, concepts and behavioral changes for both mentee and mentor. A stronger theoretical framework to develop each stage of the program would strengthen the overall quality and reproducibility of the program. Recruitment was accomplished via e-mail marketing on listserves, in addition to peer-to-peer communication. A lack of strategic sampling brings forth a concern of bias owing to individuals who may not have heard of the program or were unable to complete the application. Only a fifth of the DPD program students at Texas A&M applied for this program, suggesting that it was not for everyone. Two mentor/mentee relationships disbanded due to some mentee missteps

TABLE 1 Description of Mid-East Texas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Mentorship Program

Component	Description
Program prerequisites	Junior/senior-level DPD students
Program description	Focused on providing hands-on experiences under supervision of a practicing registered dietitian.
Program objectives	As a mentee, you should be able to:
	• Maintain professionalism in the work place
	• Foster improved communication skills within the dietetics profession
	• Understand and explain your experiences
	As a mentor, you should be able to:
	• Demonstrate professionalism and confidentiality in interactions
	• Instruct and supervise your mentee and their progress on tasks and/or projects
• Mentor by sharing personal experiences and guide mentees	

TABLE 2 Results of the Mid-East Texas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Mentorship Program

Category	Outcome
DPD students involved in program	15
Registered dietitians involved in program	8
Sample feedback from participants	“Great program, thoroughly enjoyed it”
	“I did not realize the different aspects of being a dietitian”
	“My students improved counseling skills and improved communication that will help them in their dietetics careers”
	“Great experience getting to know my students and their work has been a good asset to my practices”
Projects/mentorship concepts students worked on	Developed educational handouts (nutrition supplements, exercise recovery)
	PPT presentations for clinical staff
	Developed motivational interviewing skills
	Assess patients (via chart audits)
	Develop recipes for restricted diets
	Assisted in grocery store item evaluation

(eg, overcommitted with other duties, failed communication, and assurance), a common problem in volunteer mentoring programs.¹³ Lastly, it is unknown if there were long-term impacts on both mentor and mentee professional goals.

Mentoring is considered to be an important component of lifelong learning for both the RDN and student.⁷ Dietetic internships continue to be competitive, with nearly half of eligible candidates not matched to a program; having experiential learning experiences available would make students more competitive and increase the likelihood of being matched. In addition, there are benefits to the RDN, including expanding his/her professional network and demonstrating leadership in the profession. Academy leaders across the profession should model a mindset for “transformation, innovation, invention, adaptability, empowerment, and risk-taking.”¹⁴ We suggest more project-based mentoring programs to be developed as opportunities for mentor and mentees to cultivate leadership skills and professional experience in nutrition.

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