

Development of a Sustainable Mentorship Program: Registered Dietitian Nutritionists Mentoring Undergraduate Dietetics Students

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Formal mentoring programs for dietetics students are limited, a critical gap in student application of learning. The educational program evaluated in this study was a structured project-based mentorship program between registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and students in a didactic program in dietetics (DPD). There were 57 participants in our two-semester program, launched between a large university and a local dietetic association. The program resulted in high satisfaction ratings and strong interest in participating in the future program due to a reported increase in knowledge of concepts in the dietetics field from mentors and mentees involved. This program model has the ability to be adapted for launch at other DPD programs around the country to provide students with valuable hands-on experience in the field. *J Allied Health* 2018; 47(2):e49-e51.

PROFESSIONAL MENTORING has the potential to enhance skill development, improve communication strategies, instill confidence, and support professional development for practitioners in the health profession.¹ Similarly, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics acknowledged the importance of mentoring and included mentorship in their visioning report of 2017. Some of the dietetics profession major future needs and changes included “mentoring new practitioners” and “retention of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs), nutrition and dietetics technician registered (NDTRs), and didactic program in dietetics (DPD) students.”² Similarly, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics acknowledged the importance of mentoring, as a component of the 2017 ACEND standards for dietetic students (DPD) and dietetic interns (DI) are now a requirement.³

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Mentoring partnerships provide an opportunity for practicing RDNs to serve as role-models for aspiring students and to transform classroom learning into high-impact experiential learning experiences. A recent survey conducted with minority RDNs and undergraduate students identified barriers most commonly faced in undergraduate training. The second most common theme that emerged was that respondents felt that individual student support/mentorship/modeling was insufficient; moreover, respondents also requested opportunities to have hands-on learning experiences outside of the classroom.⁴

Mentoring programs serve a dual purpose for both practitioners and students. These relationships have large-scale impacts on career development, problem solving, confidence in practice and being prepared for the constant changes in the dietetics profession.⁵ As a result, several mentorship programs have been developed over the decades, but none with a structured framework which can be universally launched at other institutions, as presented in this article.⁶⁻⁸

This professional situational mentorship program provides an opportunity for skilled dietitians to be matched to students desiring to develop skills and better understand the profession.^{5,7} A sustainable mentorship program model involves two main approaches: 1) recruit prospective mentors (RDNs) and mentees (DPD students) to participate in this free program and 2) create sustainable partnerships by defining roles within the relationship, establishing communication expectations and overseeing progress. The objective of this research study was to demonstrate a framework for a structured mentorship program, which can be adapted for any university with a DPD program.

Program Description

The RDN Mentorship program was developed by a program coordinator from the local dietetic association and a faculty member, both practicing RDNs. This structured mentorship program was a focused short-term program launched through a professional organization partnership with the university, matching mentors (RDNs) with mentees (DPD students) for a

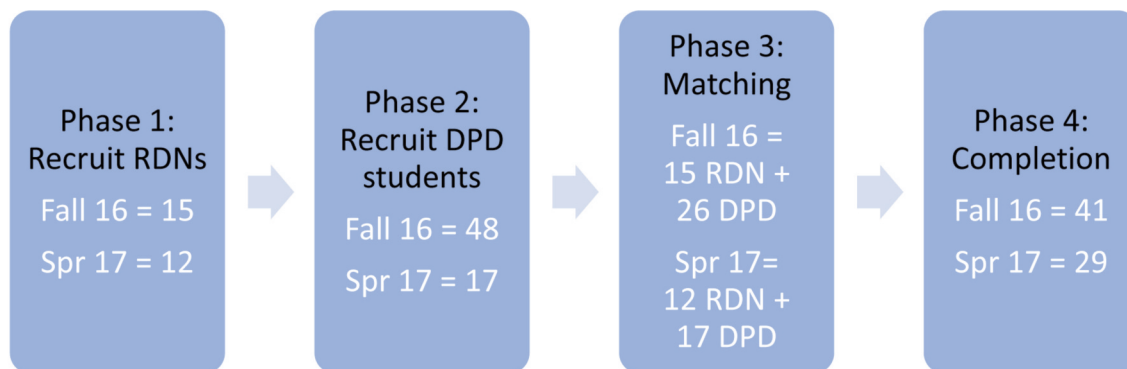


FIGURE 1. Program implementation steps. The numbers indicate the number of RDNs ($n=9$) and students who participated in both semesters ($n=6$).

project-based program.⁹ When dietitians applied to be a part of the program, they identified a project that they were interested in guiding and mentoring a student mentee.

This program mandated that dietitians meet with students at least once per month to provide guidance on that specific project. Program coordinators encouraged all potential mentors to think outside the traditional scope of clinical practice; project ideas varied per practitioner. As a project-based mentoring program, mentors helped students define learning objectives for their identified projects and provided guidance in achieving these. While the hands-on experience provided students an alternative learning experience, it also created the opportunity for networking and the creation of relationships within the nutrition community.¹⁰ This project was approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB 2016-0574D).

Implementation and Results

Program implementation required four phases: 1) recruitment of RDNs, 2) recruitment of DPD students, 3) matching RDNs and students, and 4) completion of the program (Fig. 1). The program coordinator and faculty member advertised the program via email and bul-

letins to dietitians and students as an opportunity for professional development. Interested RDNs completed Qualtrics® surveys, which requested contact information, the number of students interested in mentoring and potential project ideas. Responses were collated into a student survey and students ranked dietitians by preference of serving as their mentor. All information was de-identified, matches were made, and all participants were notified via email. For the 2016–2017 academic year, there were 18 RDNs and 39 DPD students who participated in and completed the RDN mentorship program.

A majority of dietitians ($n=9$) participated in both the fall and spring semesters, as compared to a majority of students ($n=33$) who completed only one semester of the program. Of total participants, 49 completed the online evaluation survey at the semester of participation. All students indicated that they “liked the variety of dietitians and/or projects they could choose from” and 60/61 of all mentors and mentees agreed that they “benefited from the mentorship program and would participate again.” On a rating scale of 1–10 (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied), the average response for both mentors and mentees was an 8.7, indicative of high satisfaction. A description of projects completed by mentors and mentees is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Projects Completed During Fall 2016 and Spring 2017

Research	Workshop & Skill Development	Clinical Experience
Participated in human research	Eating disorder boot camp Critiqued education sessions	Nutrition seminars Patient interviews
Literature review of research	Wrote/published a recipe book	Electronic medical record software review
Basic animal laboratory techniques	Leap-friendly food index Online marketing for nutrition	Programming for educational offerings
Wrote a published article	Handout development	Shadowing
Educational poster board	Nutrient analysis CKD foods Created an online blog Guidance on match process	Menu planning Counseling techniques Case study reviews

Discussion

The RDN mentorship program ease of development and implementations makes it a viable option to be implemented around the country for universities with DPD programs. A clear takeaway message from both RDNs and DPD students was that they enjoyed this program, benefited from the program and advanced as professionals. Feedback demonstrated this mentorship program enhanced communication, improved confidence, developed leadership skills and expanded potential career paths. Implementing this structured mentoring program at other universities can assist to meet DPD and DI ACEND knowledge requirements. Some of the strengths presented involve a method to intertwine an existing DPD program with active dietitians in the community. Unlike an eMentoring program, this program had face-to-face interaction and in-person guidance on their projects. On the other hand, there are limitations to be described with this program such as the limited number of students and dietitians in both semesters. Additionally, since this was a pilot program, we were unable to follow the student as they advanced into the profession to see if this contributed to passage of the RDN exam or enhanced success in the profession.

As a project-based program, it provided an opportunity for students to enhance skill development, serve in the role of a practitioner and build a relationship with a professional in the community. As RDN roles continue to expand due to nutrition concerns across the globe, opportunities for mentorship are in critical need. The concept of a project-based mentoring program can serve to encourage involvement, provide hands-on experiences for students and allow RDNs to serve as leaders in the profession. This program is planned to be launched in the 2017–2018 academic year at Texas

A&M University and at the University of North Florida to continue to refine a suitable model that can be adopted by other universities.

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