



# Promoting Diversity within the Dietetics Profession through a Peer Mentorship Program



“**A** SUPPORTIVE MENTOR can mean the difference between struggle and success.”<sup>1</sup> On December 31, 2012, President Barack Obama proclaimed January as National Mentoring Month.<sup>1</sup> Mentorship is vital for professional development and advancement in careers in nutrition and dietetics,<sup>2</sup> as well as related professions (eg, nursing,<sup>3</sup> academic medicine,<sup>4</sup> public health and epidemiology,<sup>5</sup> global health innovators,<sup>6</sup> occupational therapy,<sup>7</sup> and physical therapy<sup>8</sup>). Sylvia Escott-Stump, MA, RD, LDN, dietetics internship (DI) director for East Carolina University and consultant for Nutritional Balance, explained, “Often the best way to become successful is by teaching and supporting others.”<sup>9</sup> Because mentoring is recognized as being important, the Academy started offering mentoring programs. In addition, local and state dietetics associations have mentoring opportunities for registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) to mentor aspiring RDNs. The intent of this article is to present an

overview of a peer mentoring program for the DI at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) to promote diversity within the dietetics field. Understanding the experiences and components of the CSUN DI peer mentoring program may be helpful to other DI programs who want to promote diversity and mentorship in dietetics education and the profession.

Given the changing demographics in the United States, promoting diversity within dietetics is a priority.<sup>10</sup> The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics offers the Diversity Promotion Grant<sup>11</sup> to support the recruitment or retention of underrepresented groups (eg, African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and men). In 2010, the CSUN DI was awarded a \$10,000 grant to promote diversity over a 2-year period. The CSUN DI program established the CSUN DI Peer Mentorship Program to Promote Diversity. The focus of the program was to pair up current dietetics interns with underrepresented students planning to apply to DIs. The dietetics interns served as mentors to the students and helped prepare them through the application process.

## EXAMPLE DIETETICS MENTORING PROGRAMS

Informal and formal mentorship often takes place between students and professors, interns and preceptors, as well as between established RDNs and novice RDNs. For example, in 1999, the Mid-Career Mentoring Program in California was created with the support of an Academy Affiliate/Dietetic Practice Group Collaborative Strategic Initiatives Grant.<sup>12</sup> In this program, RDNs with advanced skills were paired with mentees looking to develop new skills. Mentors were carefully selected and trained by district mentoring coordinators, using a standardized “lesson plan” presentation and the “Helping Hand Manual” developed for the program and containing handouts

for the mentors and mentees. By connecting skilled RDNs with others requiring their same skills, creating networking opportunities through interactions, and the potential to develop plans for their Professional Development Portfolio 2001, this program helped RDNs and nutrition and dietetics technicians, registered, develop skills and opportunities for career changes.<sup>12</sup>

Another mentoring program took place in the Army Dietetic Internship Program.<sup>13</sup> Dietetics interns were paired with staff members over the course of a year. On the completion of 1 year, they found that the mentorship program helped dietetics interns with the transition from intern to staff member, improved job satisfaction, and helped develop technical and leadership skills.

One method that has been found to be effective is peer mentoring circles (ie, having an experienced public health nutritionist mentor groups of novice community-based dietitians).<sup>14,15</sup> In these mentoring circles, a workforce development intervention conducted in Australia by Palermo, Hughes, and McCall, 32 novice public health nutritionists attended a mentoring circle for 2 hours every 6 weeks over a 7-month period during work hours. Participants were provided with both pre and post evaluations, which indicated an increase in their confidence in their work roles. The program was successful in promoting professional competency and passion for the field.

## GROWTH OF E-MENTORING

Although traditional mentoring was most often conducted in person, more organizations are turning to electronic or e-mentoring as an effective means to cut costs and still maintain successful mentoring programs.<sup>16</sup> E-mentoring has been used by many organizations, including the Dietitians in Business and Communications dietetics practice group, in which interactions between mentees and mentors primarily took

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place via e-mail or phone. Adding the electronic component saved money and expedited response time because mentees did not need to wait for scheduled visits to ask questions.<sup>16</sup> Online communication also opened up opportunities for mentees and mentors from rural areas to participate. With e-mentoring, mentors can have more than one mentee, and mentees can participate in more than one program. E-mentoring provides many advantages.

Based on the benefits of e-mentoring, the Academy designed its eMentoring program to search for mentor or mentee matches who best fit a participant's areas of interest, practice type, geographic location, preferred communication style, and more.<sup>17</sup> Since the introduction of the program in 2011, its numbers continue to grow, with currently 500 mentors and more than 2,000 mentees.

### CREATING THE CSUN/WIC DIETETIC INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

In June 2010, the CSUN/WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) Dietetic Internship Program was awarded the Academy Diversity Promotion Grant. These funds were used to carry out a peer mentoring program to increase cultural diversity in dietetics. Located in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, CSUN is considered one of California's largest universities, educating more than 35,000 students. With a population of 31.4% Latino for the 2010 fall semester,<sup>18</sup> CSUN was certified by the US Department of Education as a Hispanic-Serving Institute. In 2008, 42.4% of the San Fernando Valley population was Latino and 10% was Asian.<sup>19</sup> For 2004-2005, CSUN was ranked fifth in the nation for bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students. With a population of 8.2% Asian-American students, CSUN also ranked as 11th in the nation for bachelor's degrees awarded to all minority students for the 2004-2005 school year. The 2013 CSUN dietetic program's annual report showed that of 312 dietetics students, 98 were Hispanic (31.4%). These are all students, from freshman to senior years. However, of the 46 students that applied to dietetic internship program, only two were Hispanic (4.3%). The purpose of the peer mentoring program was to recruit and mentor underrepresented dietetics

students, to assist with acceptance to DIs, and ultimately to increase the diversity of RDNs so as to better represent the population.

Evidence shows that mentees can gain knowledge on how to grow their professional skills.<sup>20</sup> However, mentors also can benefit from the relationship. Mentors may feel validated when receiving positive feedback from mentees, and mentors may become more inspired about their own careers when helping mentees develop their professional skills.

Many RDNs and dietetics students around the country have taken part in mentoring programs that have proved successful. However, most mentoring programs are by preceptors or RDNs already working in the field, and they rarely focus on a peer-to-peer mentoring program. Currently, limited studies exist that outline a peer mentoring program in the DI program designed to increase diversity in dietetics. Finally, studies are needed that demonstrate whether these peer mentoring programs are successful in promoting diversity in the field of dietetics.

### BREAKING DOWN THE CSUN PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

The peer mentoring program to promote diversity was developed to increase diversity in the field of dietetics by mentoring underrepresented dietetics students. Early recruitment and increasing the visibility of minority dietitians are important strategies to increase ethnic minorities and males into DIs.<sup>21</sup> Recruitment began 9 months before the initiation of the program. Students were recruited at the California Dietetic Association conference in April 2011, California WIC Association conference in April 2011, and the Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo in October 2011. Flyers were sent to targeted undergraduate nutrition and dietetics programs, and promotion took place during DI site visits. In the second year of the program, mentees from year 1 participated in the recruitment process.

Mentees were invited to complete an online application for the program. In the first year of the program, 23 applicants applied and 14 were selected, and in the second year, 28 applied and 12 were selected. Mentees and mentors were paired, when possible, by commonalities such as attending

the same didactic programs in dietetics, growing up in the same area, or by ethnic group. Mentors met with the peer mentor coordinator to clarify expectations. Next, mentees and mentors attended a 1-day orientation together. The peer mentor coordinator provided the presentation and gave a peer mentoring handbook and other informational materials to the participants. At the onset of the program, mentees and mentors were provided with a cultural food project to assist with breaking the ice and building rapport between mentee and mentor. During the initial meeting, mentors and mentees were asked to develop a plan for maintaining frequent contact and communication. The dietetic interns were required to spend minimally 24 hours (4 hours per week for 6 weeks) with their mentees in person, by phone, by video chat, or by e-mail. Throughout the program, the mentors provided the mentees with helpful handouts, resources, and advice to coach and support them through the DI application process. The [Figure](#) demonstrates the peer mentoring project steps and timeline.

In this program, the dietetics interns served as mentors, providing one-on-one guidance through the DI application and interview process. At the completion of the program, the mentee interns that did match with a DI program were provided tips on successfully completing their DI by their mentors. Students who did not match were encouraged to meet with their mentors and DI director to work on areas of improvement to become stronger applicants the following year. Some of the suggestions included obtaining additional work experience, contacting the internship programs to obtain feedback on improving applications (become a stronger applicant), taking graduate-level nutrition classes to improve their grade point average, and continued working with the mentee or peer mentoring program.

### PROGRAM OUTCOMES IN THE FIRST 2 YEARS

All mentees came from underrepresented groups in dietetics. More specifically, the program was able to increase the number of Hispanic students matched with a peer mentor from 2 of 12 (17%) to 4 of 12 (33%),

# PRACTICE APPLICATIONS

Month	Key tasks
April-August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment of mentees through professional and student organizations (eg, California Dietetic Association conference, California WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) Association conference, Food &amp; Nutrition Conference &amp; Expo).</li> <li>Develop and distribute flyers to various undergraduate nutrition and dietetic programs.</li> <li>Provide information and flyers to employees and preceptors during site visits and meetings.</li> </ul>
April-August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet with faculty, partners, and advisory board.</li> <li>Develop training and orientation materials.</li> <li>Launch website and prepare application.</li> <li>Mentors who are dietetics interns are selected through the April dietetics internship match.</li> </ul>
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide a link for students who are interested in participating in the mentoring program as mentees to complete an online application.</li> </ul>
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review applications.</li> </ul>
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interview and select mentees.</li> <li>Administer pretest to all mentors and mentees.</li> <li>Conduct mentoring and cultural diversity training for all mentors and staff.</li> <li>Host orientation for the new mentors and mentees, and go over program requirements.</li> </ul>
October-March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentors and mentees spend 24 hours working together, meet monthly as a group, and attend advisement sessions and dietetics internship support classes.</li> <li>The program coordinator will obtain feedback and implement changes if necessary.</li> <li>Mentors and mentees work together on a cultural diversity project (eg, culturally diverse recipes, health practices).</li> <li>Mentors assist mentees with the dietetic internship application process. They review the mentee application, letter of recommendation, statement of purpose, and so forth.</li> <li>Mentors encourage mentees to apply and submit completed and competitive application to dietetics internship programs.</li> <li>Throughout the mentoring program, mentors are required to conduct outreach and recruitment and to participate in career days to encourage future students to participate in the peer mentoring program.</li> </ul>
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect posttest and evaluation data as well as dietetics internship matching data.</li> </ul>
April-May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wrap-up session and meeting: mentor and mentees meet after the DI Match Process.</li> <li>If mentee is matched to a dietetics internship program, mentors provide tips for success information.</li> <li>If mentee is not matched to a dietetics internship program, the mentors continue working with the mentee to provide guidance and ways to improve their application process to apply again.</li> </ul>
Summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess outcome measures.</li> <li>Write evaluation report.</li> <li>Present results to advisory board.</li> <li>Look for funding opportunities to expand the program to first-year Didactic Program in Dietetics students.</li> </ul>

**Figure.** Timeline and key tasks of California State University, Northridge (CSUN) Peer Mentoring Program.

Asian students from 1 of 12 (8%) to 3 of 12 (25%), African-American students from 1 of 12 (8%) to 2 of 12 (17%), Middle Eastern students from 2 of 12 (17%) to 3 of 13 (23%), and males from no males to 3 of 12 (25%) males. The mentors, mentees, DI preceptors, and employers were evaluated at the end of the 1-year program. Seven of 11 students (64%) who applied to DIs gained acceptance into an accredited DI

program. Two who did not match reapplied the following year and were accepted into DI programs. Thus, nine of 11 (82%) were eventually accepted into an accredited DI program. Of the mentees who were accepted into an accredited DI program, 10 of 11 (92%) believed the peer mentor program contributed to their success. For example, one mentee stated, "What I enjoyed the best about this program

was having support and guidance from my mentor (someone who really knows about the process and was accepted into a program) during this stressful process." In general, the mentees articulated that they related more to individuals who had recently experienced the same process (ie, their mentors), rather than an established RDN who might have had very different requirements or experiences.

Evaluation also indicated the value of the program to the mentors. All of the mentors rated their experience as very positive. For example, one mentor stated, "I feel this program gave me important experience in how to provide support and guidance as a mentor." Most of the mentors discussed their appreciation for the opportunity to guide a future professional in the field, and looked forward to other opportunities to contribute to the profession in a mentoring role. They also expressed an increased knowledge of cultural diversity from working with diverse populations.

All of the employers and 72% (15 of 21) of the preceptors surveyed agreed the dietetic interns were well-prepared and provided with excellent nutrition education in a multicultural setting. Feedback received by the DI director from employers and preceptors at an advisory board meeting regarding the program was very positive. Specifically, they believed that increasing the cultural diversity of the dietetics interns was beneficial because they could better represent the populations served.

### CHALLENGES

Although the program was generally considered a success, there were some barriers. Because of the recent development of the program the number of applicants that applied to the program was smaller than expected for year 1. By year 2, more students were aware of the program and applied to be mentees. The program was also faced with a limited number of mentors. The DI program was limited to 12 interns; thus, only 12 mentors were available. During year 1, two mentors agreed to mentor two students each (instead of one). All mentors were simultaneously completing their DIs and were required to complete 1,216 hours of supervised practice. Furthermore, most of the mentors were taking two graduate-level courses, so they were challenged by time constraints. Finding time when both mentee and mentor were available was an additional barrier.

One way to overcome these barriers is to possibly develop a peer mentoring academic class, making the peer mentoring part of the DI rotation and experience hours and possibly looking

at additional funding for and expanding of the DI program. For example, the funding by the Academy covered the cost of the peer mentor coordinator, orientation speakers, room and food costs, materials, supplies, and travel costs to the Academy Diversity Action Committee meeting. Additional funding could cover transportation costs for mentors and mentees, additional trainings, and possibly even a stipend for the mentors.

### LESSONS LEARNED

With its current success, the CSUN peer mentoring program plans to continue seeking additional funding to expand the program. In addition, it plans to identify students early in the program to assist them with obtaining experience, study skills, and networking to better prepare them for success. If able to obtain additional funding, the program will seek a larger pool of mentees and expand its outreach process through local and professional organizations.

It is important that RDNs continue to serve as mentors while being mentored by other professionals. We must continue to provide mentor programs. In doing so, we will be able to grow as a whole and fortify the future of our profession.

Through evaluation of similar mentoring programs, we found that other mentoring programs do not have follow-up data from their participants. Many mentoring programs evaluate their efficacy with an end-of-program survey or post-intervention interview but do not assess the long-term outcomes of these programs.<sup>13,14</sup> The CSUN peer mentoring program stays in touch with mentees so that follow-up data can be collected on the program. A survey through SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>) was administered after the completion of the program. In the summer after the program, the outcome measures were assessed, and an evaluation report was written and presented to the Advisory Board. Mentors were encouraged to continue communicating with mentees through e-mail or in-person meetings. Mentoring programs could benefit by staying in touch with mentees and mentors so that long-term data can be collected on the effectiveness of these programs.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR DIETETICS RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Given that the CSUN program was able to increase the diversity of the Latino, Asian, African-American, Middle Eastern, and male dietetics interns in the program, and was well received by the mentees, preceptors, and employers, the concept of peer mentoring could be expanded to other DIs. Possible further research would include mentorship programs for dietetics students and high school students considering a career in dietetics. In addition, further research could be conducted on the benefits of dietetics intern training in cultural diversity.

With incorporating peer mentoring in all areas of dietetics, practitioners can help increase awareness of dietetics and nutrition as a health profession, increase the number of ethnically diverse professionals in nutrition and dietetics, increase the number of ethnically diverse RDNs, and model a program designed to increase the success of these students as they move into careers. Suggestions for activities at DI programs include:

- development of a school-to-career pathway into a health profession for underrepresented students through a partnership with local schools, colleges, and universities;
- early outreach and assignment of a mentor to community college students planning for a career in dietetics through a partnership with a local community college;
- development of a mentoring program for employees to facilitate entry to and success in the dietetics program or profession;
- concurrent internship and service as a peer mentor to master's level-dietetics intern students; and
- collaboration with professional organizations to offer career opportunities, internships, and volunteer work.

Based on pilot data, we know that mentees do better in their internships when they are mentored as undergraduates, but we tested the program only with students who were in their senior year. With future interventions, there is a need to start mentoring early, so that we can provide more guidance to students in

areas of work experience, encourage involvement in professional or student organizations (increase sense of belonging), and assist with classes (improve academic preparation for DI program).

With this project, the purpose was to recruit and mentor underrepresented dietetics students with the overarching goal of increasing interest of underrepresented students in pursuing a career in dietetics and to improve the educational outcomes for minority students in the discipline, especially Hispanic students, given the high percentage of Hispanics in Southern California. Suggestions for the current program as well as other DIs include:

1. devising strategies to recruit underrepresented minority students and to increase awareness of the RDN as an achievable career path for culturally diverse students;
2. developing additional strategies, in addition to peer mentoring, to increase success of culturally diverse undergraduates in completing the Didactic Program in Dietetics and entry into a graduate internship program; and
3. monitoring students' progress and mentoring students to increase numbers of culturally diverse students completing the DI program and successfully passing the Registration Examination for Dietitians.

Peer mentoring can be a valuable tool to assist with increasing diversity. Based on the initial results of this program,

other Didactic Program in Dietetics and DI programs might consider similar efforts to increase the cultural diversity of their programs to better represent changing demographics in the United States.

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## DISCLOSURES

### STATEMENT OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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