

Courage of the Over- and Underrepresented

By 2050, according to some estimates (1), the minority in our country will be the majority, with Hispanic, black, and Asian-Americans comprising over half the US population. As this diversification of our country as a whole takes place, are similar demographic changes happening in the dietetics profession? The evidence shows that, despite our effort to increase the numbers of underrepresented groups, little progress has been made. And this historical look does little to change what the future holds.



Judith C. Rodriguez

TOMORROW'S DIETETICS

It is only through setting ambitious goals, creating a plan, and taking decisive and committed action that our profession and our Association will start to look more like the America of today and, especially, tomorrow. Important points to keep in mind in creating such a plan include:

- Many members from underrepresented groups probably do not want to have “minority nutrition and health issues” as their specialty area—and they should not be forced into that practice area, nor should anyone presume that is what they should do. Some minority members have chosen men’s or African-American nutrition issues as areas of specialty, but many more are respected for their knowledge in diabetes, oncology, food systems, or other areas of practice.
- Many members from the majority group may want to have “minority health” as their specialty area—and they should feel free and comfortable with that choice.
- Promoting diversity within a profession does not decrease the quality of education or practitioners and to imply such is an insult to persons from underrepresented groups. If quality falters, it is a failure of the system or process that was put in place.
- Increasing diversity within an organization allows it to change and adapt to inevitable social trends and

expand its reach to different populations.

- Whatever sex, ethnicity, or other group you represent, we all have the same responsibility: to work together, in good faith and spirit, to increase the number of underrepresented individuals in our profession.

ROLE MODELS NEEDED

Members of traditionally underrepresented groups demonstrate every day how to make significant contributions to our profession and Association. There are so many noteworthy examples among our accomplished membership that space permits naming only a handful: Martin M. Yadrick, MS, MBA, RD, FADA, was not only ADA’s first male president, he has been a champion for cultural diversity in dietetics for many years. Cecilia Pozo Fileti, MS, RD, FADA, was the first Latina to be nominated for ADA President. Fabiola D. Gaines, RD, LD, and Roniece A. Weaver, MS, RD, LD, developers of the Soul Food Pyramid (<http://www.soulfoodpyramid.org>), are well-known for their entrepreneurial ventures and creativity. Mary Lee Chin, MS, RD, who served as a spokesperson for ADA, is highly respected for her work with the media. And Manuel Villacorta, MS, RD, CSSD, arrived in the United States 22 years ago from Lima, Peru, speaking no English. Today, he is a successful RD and ADA spokesperson. “I feel

these are exciting times for the field of dietetics, and it is the time to become very involved at the organizational and community levels,” he says. “My contribution has been as an active role model, speaker, mentor, and educator—not only for Latino dietitians but also by contributing to the Latino community.”

BENEFITS ARE OBVIOUS

The face of America is changing. How can ADA and dietetics remain relevant if our membership does not reflect that face? Correctly or not, we will be perceived as out of touch, archaic, and failing to acknowledge and adapt to a changing world.

We can start by taking Gandhi’s words to heart: We must become the change we want to see in the world. If you are a member of the majority group, you have a responsibility to mentor minorities: in dietetics that could mean a male, a Muslim, an African American, or someone with a disability. If you are a member of the minority group, you also need to mentor others; it is only in taking that responsibility that you can look to your majority colleagues and ask the same from them.

The benefits of a more diverse membership are so obvious that this is a task we must all undertake together or we will fail together. It takes courage to change a longstanding system. Let’s heed Roseanne Cash’s words: “The key to change . . . is to let go of fear.” We *will* let go of fear, adapt, and use change to strengthen ourselves, our profession, and our association.

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Reference

1. Passel J, Cohn D. Immigration to play lead role in future US Growth: US population projections: 2005-2050. Pew Research Center Web site. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/729/united-states-population-projections>. Accessed May 20, 2010.