

# Cultivating the Desire to Mentor in Dietetic Interns

*Editor's Note: This article is part of a series developed by the Nutrition and Dietetic Educators and Preceptors (NDEP) group on emerging topics of interest in dietetics education.*

**T**HE ACADEMY OF NUTRITION and Dietetics (Academy) 2017 Visioning Report<sup>1</sup> identified mentoring new practitioners as part of the career advancement and leadership needed to address future needs and changes within the dietetics profession. The current dietetics education model is based on a competency-based program where interns are trained by preceptor professionals in the field. Effective preceptors display a desire and commitment to mentor and facilitate learning.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, these individuals are necessary to give timely, relevant feedback and identify knowledge deficiencies in the dietetic interns under their supervision. To best support preceptors, ongoing training as well as clearly defined responsibilities are essential. A 2002 survey of Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) conducted by Marincic and Francfort showed that 58% received no training for serving as a preceptor.<sup>3</sup> A 2008 report highlighted the preceptor shortage that was likely a result of many factors, including lack of training.<sup>4</sup> In 2007, the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) began offering a free online preceptor training program that awards continuing education units to motivate preceptors to get involved and offer an incentive to RDNs for completing quality training.<sup>5</sup>

According to Connor,<sup>5</sup> a lack of preceptors nationwide continues to be a factor in the limited number of supervised practice positions available to didactic program in dietetics graduates. The preceptor-intern model is the standard for supervised practice for dietetics internships (DI) and coordinated programs (CP). The reality is that the DIs and CPs rely on preceptors to run these programs and that the quality of preceptors affiliated with each program directly influences student and program outcomes. The call for preceptors is not new, and more recently, Presidents of the Academy have been encouraging RDNs to become preceptors.<sup>5-7</sup>

Preceptors have indicated that maintaining a safe learning experience is a responsibility of preceptorship that allows interns the opportunity to learn from mistakes and develop essential entry-level skills. Although the desire to be a preceptor may be present, not all RDN positions allow the time needed to work with interns. Costs associated with being a preceptor include the time investment related to planning and oversight of the interns in addition to an already busy job routine.<sup>8</sup>

In 2016, the 2017 Accreditation Standards for Nutrition and Dietetics Coordinated Programs, Didactic Programs, Internship Programs, Technician Programs, Foreign Dietitian Education Programs, and International Dietetics Education Programs were released.<sup>9</sup> A new Competency for Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (CRDN) 2.15: *Practice and/or role-play mentoring and precepting others* was introduced. "Planting the seed" to be a preceptor during a student's supervised practice experience is one goal behind this new competency. A 2014 survey conducted by Winham and colleagues<sup>10</sup> indicated that 49% of interns surveyed had no emphasis on being a preceptor during their DI. Mentorship and precepting are cornerstones of health professions, including dietetics, and a lack of focus

on precepting during an internship could be detrimental to fostering the desire to "give back."

To facilitate completion of CRDN 2.15 and develop the integral skills of mentoring and precepting, DI faculty at the University of Central Arkansas used an educational technique known as appreciative inquiry (AI). AI offers participants (in this case, interns) the opportunity to share personal stories, role play as a preceptor, individually reflect on what precepting means, and create an action plan to develop the skills needed to eventually serve as a preceptor.

## HOW IS THE DIETETICS PROFESSION ENGAGING PRECEPTORS?

In 2017, CDR allowed preceptors to earn continuing education hours, and CDR has provided support to attend the Academy's annual Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE) as incentives for precepting.<sup>10</sup> As a result of the recognition that preceptors should be rewarded for quality mentoring, several avenues to engage preceptors have arisen.<sup>11,12</sup> For example, the Academy designated April as National Preceptor Month to increase awareness and recognition of the vital role of preceptors. In addition, CDR launched an online "Find-A-Preceptor" database and offers online preceptor training for 8 free hours of continuing professional education units. The Nutrition and Dietetics Educators and Preceptors Council (NDEP) has a dedicated preceptor committee whose aim is preceptor recruitment and retention. Additionally, NDEP members host a breakfast and reception each year at FNCE, which includes recognition of Outstanding Preceptor Awardees from each of the NDEP regions. National Outstanding Preceptor Award winners receive financial support to attend FNCE and a designated ribbon on name badges. At the local level, DIs and CPs often recognize outstanding preceptors at local events, offer recognition during National Preceptor Month,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2018.01.007>

CRDN 2.15 Evaluation Rubric					
Name: _____ Date: _____					
<b>Directions for Evaluation:</b> For each criterion listed below the competency, check the appropriate box to indicate if it has been met. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If all 3 or 4 – intern passes and should receive level 4 or 3 on that competency</li> <li>• If there are a significant number of 1 or 2 boxes checked, intern fails competency and should receive score of 1 or 2 score and must repeat assignment.</li> </ul>	4 - Outstanding (pass)				
	3 - Good (pass)				
	2 - Needs Improvement (fail)				
	1 - Poor (fail)				
	Level of Performance				
<b>CRDN 2.15 Practice and/or role-play mentoring and precepting others.</b>	4	3	2	1	Unable to evaluate
Participated in activity in professional manner (engaged and stayed on topic throughout)					
Thoroughly explored impact of the preceptor (used entire time allotted for each step of the activity)					
Identified three skills of preceptors (appropriate and logical)					
Identified three reasons to become a preceptor (focused on the profession rather than self)					
Dream discussion (focused on hopes, dreams and vision for the program; framed differences in positive light rather than gripe session)					
Design stage identified specific and measurable actions for the program					
Design stage identified specific and measurable actions for the intern to develop preceptor skills identified in the discovery stage					
Destiny stage identified actionable steps for completing the steps identified in the design stage (addresses potential barriers)					
<b>Intern strengths and/or areas needing improvement. Must complete if intern receives score &lt; 3 (continue on back if needed):</b>					
<b>Program director signature/date:</b>					
<b>Intern signature/date:</b>					

**Figure 1.** Rubric for evaluating the interns during practice mentoring and precepting.

and send thank-you cards or other gestures of appreciation at the end of each intern's rotation. Some worksites may allow (or require) serving as a preceptor to be included in employee evaluation and promotion criteria.<sup>11,12</sup> In addition to local/national awards and incentives for preceptors, introducing the concept of mentoring and precepting during supervised practice is a unique opportunity to guide future dietetics practitioners to serve as preceptors. However, simply discussing the need for preceptors with interns may not result in their actually precepting once in practice.

### HOW DO OTHER PROFESSIONS ENGAGE PRECEPTORS?

Nutrition and dietetics practitioners are not alone in using preceptors to train new practitioners and to retain effective preceptors. Other professions

use the term *mentor* to describe field preceptors. In 2013, Kashiwagi and colleagues<sup>13</sup> reviewed mentoring programs for practicing physicians and found that dyad pairings of physicians contributed to professional development, particularly related to career choice and faculty retention.<sup>13</sup> Nursing research has also identified the importance of role playing, preceptor training, and recognition for growth and development of preceptors.<sup>14,15</sup>

School psychologists use on-site mentors and specify requirements for professional development responsibilities.<sup>16</sup> Mentoring is a key role in student training of occupational therapists, physical therapists and speech-language pathologists.<sup>17-19</sup> Developing the expectation of mentorship by serving as a preceptor is an important professional (and ethical)

duty of all health professionals, including RDNs.

### WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a form of action research that uses dialogue to identify what a group or organization wants more of, in this case more preceptors, and focuses on positive changes to meet desired goals.<sup>20</sup> This approach started with David Cooperrider's doctoral research on physician leadership at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. It began in the late 1970s with Cooperrider's goal of conducting research in a way that generated new ideas. The four-dimensional model of AI appeared in the late 1990s and led to applications in a variety of business and educational settings.<sup>21-23</sup>

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