

The Value of Belonging: The Recent History of Member Services at the Academy



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ALTHOUGH ASSOCIATIONS often are the backbone of an industry, members—naturally—are the backbone of the associations. Across the globe, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy) is the largest organization of food and nutrition practitioners. Academy membership is considered to be an investment in one's career and the reasons to join are plentiful, providing access to a wide array of benefits designed to advance dietetics careers and augment networking opportunities. Academy members come from a vast range of practice areas and work experience and professional interests, but all convene at the intersection of their shared profession.

When the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* was founded in 1917, along with establishing a governance structure, building a cohesive membership was top priority. But first, there were questions to answer: Who was qualified to be a member? Should there be membership categories? How much

**Until 2012, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics was called the American Dietetic Association. Throughout this article, it will be referred to as "the Academy."*

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should dues be? In that first year, nearly 60 members joined.¹

Membership totals increased each year thereafter, but then a groundswell of membership—a doubling of both members and budget—began in 1970 and continued into the penultimate decade of the 20th century. Nearly 2,000 new members enrolled each year in that time period. In 1986, the Academy had put forth even greater recruitment efforts, boosting new member totals to more than 2,800 in the first half of the year alone.¹

From the last decade of the 20th century and continuing to the present day, Academy Member Services would address several issues affecting the membership, including a sluggish economy, a need for boosting benefits of membership, updates to categorization of member level types in line with changing trends in the profession, and implementing a system for identifying member needs and ensuring that membership reflects a high value for membership dollars and celebrates the relationship between the Academy and its members.

REFINING THE DEFINITION OF MEMBERSHIP

Who can be an Academy member is something that the leadership has taken into account since the Academy's founding, evolving with shifting practice roles and member needs. In 1991-1992, the 62,604 Academy members were categorized as Active members, Associate members, Technician members, Affiliate members, Retired members, and Honorary members.² In Fall 2001, the House of Delegates (HOD) approved a series of changes to membership categories. At the time, the Associate category was segmented from its original composition of Student members and individuals who completed an Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND)-accredited Didactic Program in Dietetics. When changes were

implemented, beginning with the 2002-2003 membership year, students comprised the new Student category and individuals who had earned a bachelor's degree and completed the Didactic Program in Dietetics were assigned to the Active category. In 2006, the 62,395 members were classified as Active, Student, Retired, Life, and Honorary members. In 2015, the 75,000+ members are categorized as Active, Student, International, Retired, Life, Honorary, and Academy Associate. Though registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and nutrition and dietetics technicians, registered (NDTRs) had been previously cast into separate categories, they ultimately were condensed into the active category.

A SENSE OF BELONGING STARTS EARLY

A student membership category did not exist at the Academy until 1985, but those students were then categorized as "associate members." In 2001, to more accurately reflect the member base in this category, the associate classification was renamed "student membership," and members in the "returning student" category—those coming back from a hiatus from studies—were classified as a student membership subcategory.

Within 10 years, student membership grew exponentially—a roll of more than 17,000 members, representing an 80% market share of dietetics students. By the end of fiscal year 2014-2015, that market share had grown to 85%, with nearly 21,000 student members.

Credit to the rising student membership totals at a time when other associations were seeing declines goes to the Academy's understanding of the mutually beneficial criticality of early

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engagement. Boosting student membership totals represents a substantial contribution to the foundation of the Academy's future. Playing a large role in this boost was the 2005 creation of the Academy's first-ever Student Council, including an eight-member advisory committee, which was spurred by the recognition that creating tomorrow's dietetics leaders necessitated finding today's students while still enrolled in school. The Student Council (now called the Student Advisory Committee) represented an opportunity for student members "to meet, confer, promote involvement in [Academy] activities, and participate in the [Academy] at the national, affiliate, and district levels."³

This addition of the student committee structure had helped the Academy net 2,000 student members in a 2-year period. The work of this

committee brought about several developments⁴:

- the annual Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE) Student Forum;
- publication of a newsletter, *Student Scoop*, to communicate student membership benefits and other topics of interest; and
- the Student Liaisons program, linking the student advisory committee to members at ACEND-approved academic programs, which saw a sign-up that met 30% of its goal within 1 month of its 2006 formation.

Additional initiatives in the student member program include a student member-focused Student and New Professionals track at FNCE, featuring educational sessions focused on careers, networking, and professional

development; National Nutrition Month (NNM) contests for student dietetic associations and clubs that encourage hosting of NNM events; and the Student Community web portal communication tool for student members and liaisons to network, learn about membership benefits, and participate in special discussions with committees, dietetic practice groups (DPGs), and member interest groups (MIGs) of the Academy. Communications specifically targeting student informational needs are also frequently delivered via social media and *Eat Right Weekly*.

A SENSE OF BELONGING GOES GLOBAL

Ahead of 2008, which represented the "Year of International Dietetics" and heralded the Academy's new strategic plan that emphasized collaboration



The Student Advisory Council meets at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics headquarters in Chicago, IL.

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