

# Developing a Performance Nutrition Curriculum for Collegiate Athletics

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to provide a framework for developing a sports nutrition education program in a collegiate athletic department. A review of literature on student-athlete nutrition behaviors is combined with practical suggestions from personnel who wrote a sports nutrition curriculum at a large Midwestern university. There are 2 primary implications for practice. First, maintaining a written curriculum and conducting periodic evaluation are fundamental aspects of sports nutrition education programs. Second, better documentation of program outcomes is needed to establish best practices in collegiate sports nutrition education and demonstrate the value of full-time sports registered dietitians.

**Key Words:** athletic performance, sports, health education, curriculum, program evaluation (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2016; ■:1-6.)

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of full-time registered dietitians (RDs) employed by collegiate athletic departments has nearly quadrupled since 2010, the year the Collegiate and Professional Sports Dietitians Association was chartered. The numbers are changing rapidly, but according to the most recent data, approximately 60 schools have at least 1 full-time sports RD on staff, with hundreds more using consultant sports RDs.<sup>1</sup> As outlined in the American College of Sports Medicine position paper on Nutrition and Athletic Performance, sports RDs have many roles and responsibilities, and one of the most important is providing an evidenced-based nutrition education.<sup>2</sup>

The current literature contains numerous surveys of collegiate athletes

and their reported nutrition knowledge.<sup>3-5</sup> A few articles have described how the pioneer sports RDs developed the early elite sports nutrition programs 2 decades ago.<sup>6-8</sup> More recently, small team-based educational interventions have been documented, demonstrating that RD-facilitated education can improve athlete nutrition knowledge.<sup>9</sup> However, there is little published on the practicalities of delivering a multifaceted nutrition education program to hundreds of athletes in a collegiate athletic department. A high-quality, large-scale educational intervention begins with a written curriculum.

The purpose of this 2-part report is to provide a framework for sports RDs starting or restructuring a nutrition education program. Part I describes how a multidisciplinary collegiate sports nutrition committee applied a 5-step

curriculum development process in the unique environment of athletics.<sup>10</sup> In Part II, a specific list of 20 learning objectives is proposed, based on published literature, feedback from college athletes, and input from committee members. Better documentation of program outcomes is emphasized because more data are needed to establish best practices in collegiate sports nutrition.

## Part I: The Performance Nutrition Curriculum: Defining, Delivering, and Evaluating

By forming an advisory committee, sports RDs can collect information about athlete nutrition behaviors, perceived education needs, and available resources. Including representatives from areas outside nutrition can help expand the scope of the program and draw in additional resources and expertise. Part a in the [Figure](#) shows possible stakeholders to invite to a sports nutrition committee.

Discussion of program goals and learning objectives may be lengthy because of the diverse viewpoints of committee members. For efficient collaboration, regular meetings (ie, monthly) are preferred over electronic communication. After meetings, e-mail distribution of minutes and working

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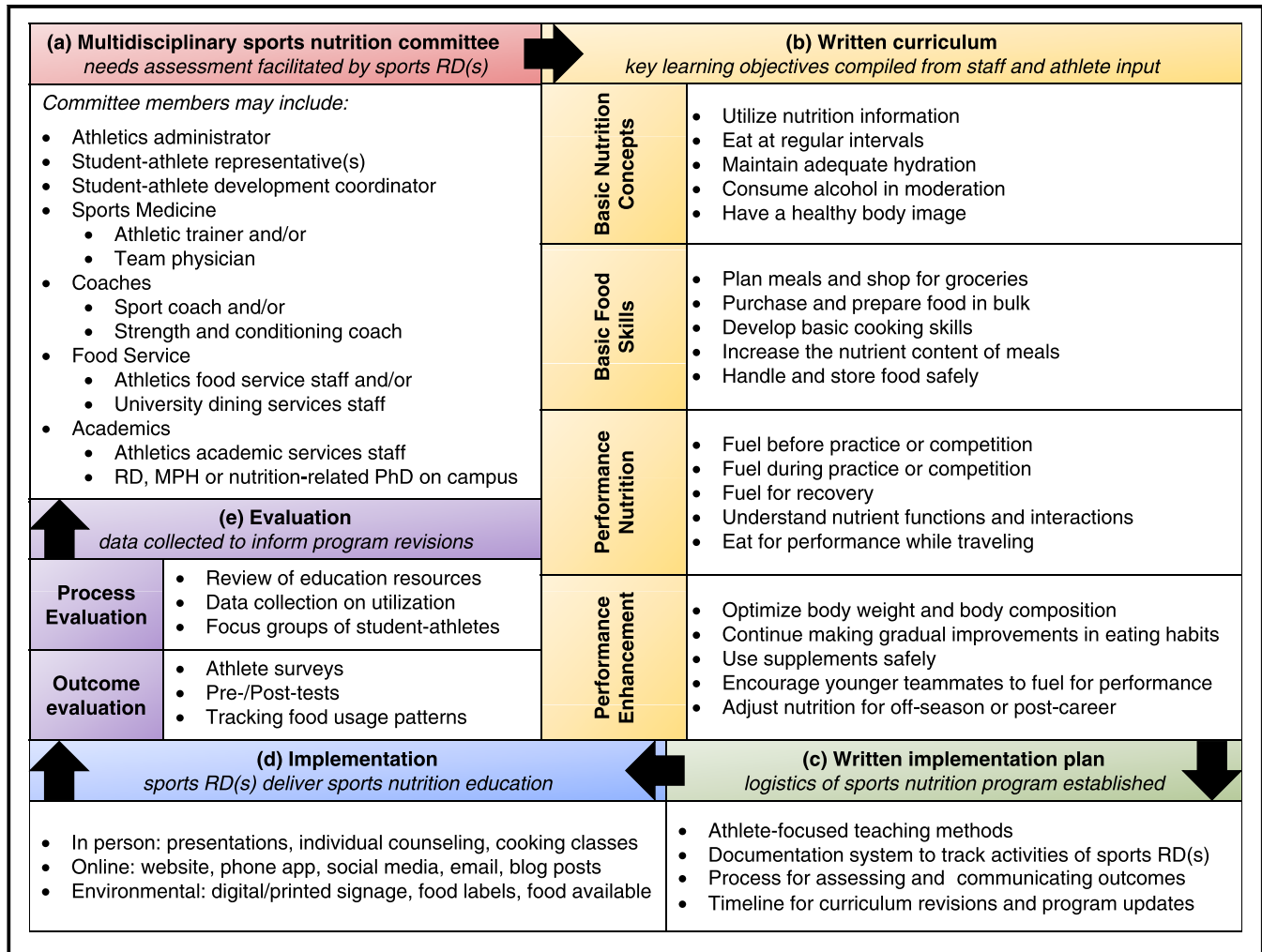
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**Figure.** Development of a performance nutrition curriculum in a collegiate athletic department. (a) Potential stakeholders to invite to a sports nutrition committee meeting. (b) Twenty sample learning objectives divided into 4 domains. (c) Logistical considerations for the curriculum planning stage. (d) Methods of education delivery by the sports RD. (e) Evaluation tools to inform program improvements. MPH indicates Master of Public Health; RD, registered dietitian.

drafts helps keep members invested. Because athletes arrive on campus with differing baseline nutrition knowledge and varying degrees of readiness to learn new concepts, athlete input should be intentionally solicited at this step to ensure the program provides information athletes want to know and feel they can use. Part b in the Figure highlights 20 potential learning objectives divided into 4 different domains. Additional considerations for the planning stage are underscored in part c in the Figure and discussed further subsequently.

Athletes are typically high-energy individuals who prefer competitions, physical tasks, or small-group discussions.<sup>11</sup> Focus groups with college freshmen found that hands-on/visual activities, basic recipes, and food comparisons were the most preferred

methods of nutrition education.<sup>12</sup> Delivery of a department-wide education should use in-person, online, and environmental interventions (part d in the Figure).<sup>13</sup>

Effective sports nutrition education has a fun, culturally relevant vibe, and engages athletes both in person and through technology/social media.

Face-to-face education can be provided by the sports RD through individual counseling, small-group (ie, team-based) talks, and large-group presentations. For cooking education, hands-on cook-

ing classes for college sophomores better increased confidence in their cooking abilities compared with cooking demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> Because scheduling around athlete schedules can be a challenge, a for-credit sports nutrition course has been proposed as a way to provide semester-long education as part of the normal course load. This approach requires knowledgeable faculty, significant preparation time, and deliberation as to whether the course should be required or an elective.<sup>15</sup> A sports RD who constructs a written nutrition curriculum for the athletic department could lay the groundwork for a future academic class at the institution.

Online resources reach a large audience but take considerable maintenance. Content may include recipes, campus dining menus, shopping lists,

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