



Retaining Hispanic Dietetic Undergraduate Students through Mentoring and Professional Development



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THE ACADEMY OF NUTRITION and Dietetics' (the Academy's) commitment to diversity within the profession and the reduction of health disparities is reflected by its diversity philosophy statement,¹ the Commission on Dietetic Registration Code of Ethics,² the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics standards,³ and in terms of education preparation and retention, the Academy's Diversity Mentoring

project.⁴ The need to augment the number of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) who are culturally competent to serve the increasing minority populations can be accomplished by implementing new curriculum for all dietetic students^{5,6} and by adding to the recruitment of culturally diverse students into undergraduate dietetic programs.³ The need to increase recruitment has been documented,⁶ but the literature has not addressed retention of students once they have been accepted into a dietetics program.

This article describes the implementation and evaluation of a mentoring program for Hispanic* undergraduate dietetics students along with a study that illustrates specific ways in which a mentoring program can retain minority students in the dietetics professions and provide support for their successful entry into the profession.⁷

BACKGROUND

Hispanics suffer from poor college completion rates when compared with other Americans; only 35% of 18- to 24-year-old Hispanics who are enrolled in college finish their degree, compared with 46% of whites.⁸ Only 11% of Hispanics aged 18 to 24 years have a bachelor's degree compared with 34% of

whites.⁹ Factors that contribute to decreased retention and poor academic achievement include low income¹⁰; disconnection with institution's faculty, student life, and department resources^{11,12}; lack of college-educated role models¹³⁻¹⁵; lack of parental higher education¹⁶; or parents prioritizing obligations to help with family chores and spend time with family and school work.^{17,18} Mentoring may serve as a strategy to retain Hispanic students in higher education programs.^{19,20}

Mentoring is an effective means of diversifying the health professions.^{6,21} Two outstanding mentoring programs in the field of dietetics have been established at the educational preparation level—the Mentoring Multicultural Students for the Food and Nutritional Sciences Program^{6,22} and the Academy's Building our Future Mentoring Project.⁴ Other well-evaluated mentoring programs in fields related to dietetics include Louisiana State University's mentoring program for the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields,²³ and allied health.²⁴ California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, is a Hispanic Serving Institution, with Hispanics comprising approximately 25% of the student body. The California State Polytechnic University in Pomona's Dietetic Mentoring Program was adapted to fit the needs of Hispanic students, but is suitable for any student. This mentoring program is the first to specifically address the needs of Hispanic undergraduate dietetics students and is based on the well-documented Tinto theory¹¹ on higher education retention. Tinto's theory identifies three major reasons for students' departure from higher education before earning a degree: academic difficulties, inability to match educational and occupational goals, and failure to integrate into the intellectual and social life of the institution.

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**The terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably in the literature to identify persons of Spanish-speaking origin or descent who designate themselves as Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or of other Hispanic origin. This group is comprised of individuals with diverse backgrounds and countries of origin including South and Central America and the Caribbean, recent immigrants as well as those individuals whose families have been in the United States for generations. This article will use the term Hispanic.*

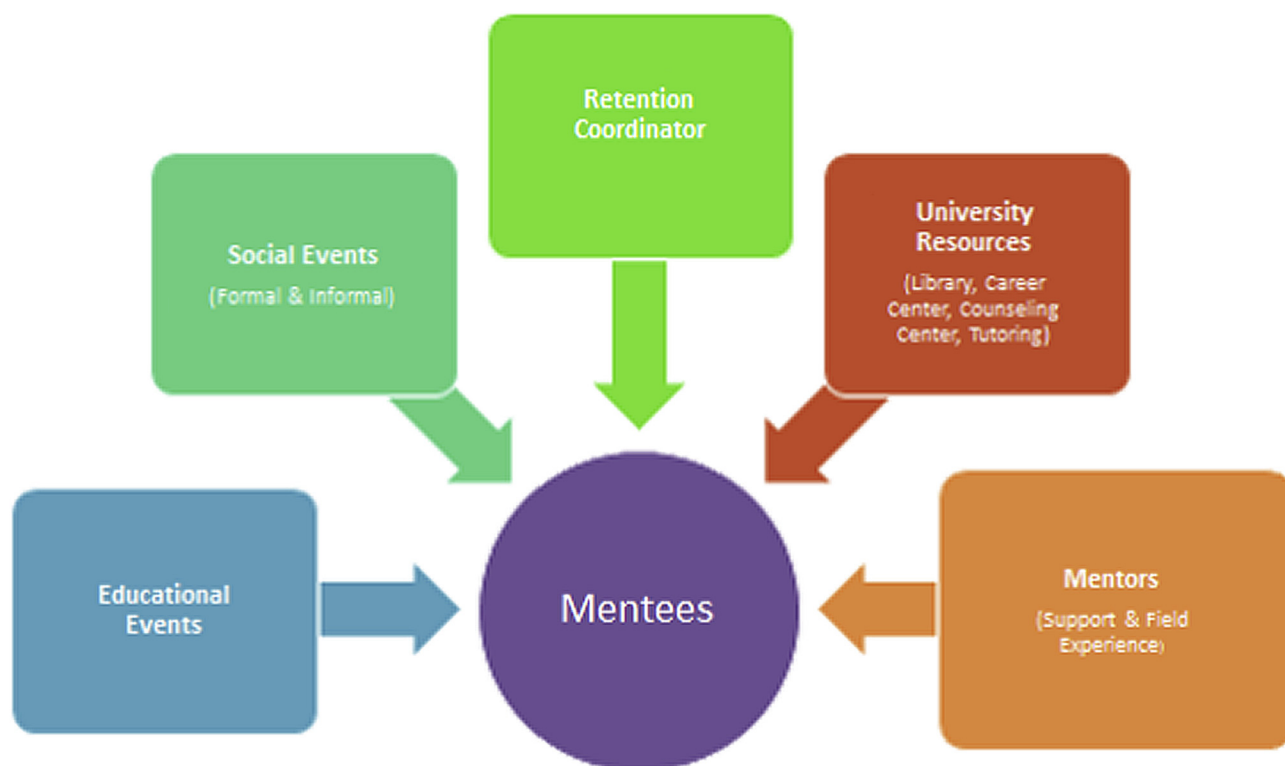


Figure. Estudiante de Dietético program model. Source: Adapted with permission²⁴: Gardner JD. A successful minority retention project. *J Nursing*. 2005;44(12):566-568.

Within the Estudiante Dietético enhanced undergraduate dietetic curriculum—aimed toward increasing dietetics students' cultural competency, especially with the Hispanic population (funded through US Department of Agriculture-Health Sciences Institute grant 2009-01198)—we sought to meet the Academy's objective to diversify the RDN workforce by creating and evaluating a student mentoring program that would encourage Hispanic students to complete their bachelor's degree, attain a high grade point average, improve their cultural competency, and learn the professional skills necessary to have a competitive edge as they compete for dietetics internships. The mentoring program was provided during the course of 1 academic year and included the following: a retention coordinator, mentors with similar ethnic backgrounds and common personal and/or professional goals to their assigned mentee, opportunities to increase awareness and connectedness with university resources, inclusion of family, and field experience with RDNs

and food and nutrition practitioners who service the Hispanic community. This mentoring project was funded in part by ADVANCE Transformation Grant 054826 from the National Science Foundation.

DESCRIPTION OF ESTUDIANTE DIETÉTICO MENTORING PROGRAM

The Estudiante Dietético mentoring program model was a synergetic effort to integrate didactic and experiential education with support from a retention coordinator, assigned mentor, and family. The role of the retention coordinator was to enhance cohesion in the student cohort, involve family, coordinate student involvement in the community, and facilitate use of university resources, as shown in the [Figure](#).

Participants

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, Institutional Review Board (Protocol 10-172) approved the study

protocol and all participants provided written informed consent. The sample consisted of 30 undergraduate dietetics students recruited from the Estudiante Dietético program. After attending a presentation about the mentoring program, interested students completed the informed consent forms. Twenty-four students (23 women, one man) volunteered to participate. The mean age was ± 23.3 years (range, 19 to 33 years). Students reported their ethnicity as Mexican American 54% ($n=13$), other Hispanic 17% ($n=4$), white non-Hispanic 17% ($n=4$), Pacific Islander 8% ($n=2$), Asian Indian 4% ($n=1$), and black 0 ($n=0$). Demographic data and student expectations for the mentoring program were collected by surveys. A one-page biography, a recent photograph, and proof of negative tuberculosis test (needed to observe clinics) were required from each participant before starting the program. Written student reflections were collected after each field and mentor observation experience. Before and after mentoring intervention assessments of satisfaction

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