

Reimagining the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children Career Ladder as Requirements Change for Registered Dietitian Nutritionists

WITH THE INCREASE IN degree requirements by the Commission on Dietetic Registration for registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs), concern was raised regarding decreasing diversity in the profession. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) track of the Maricopa County Department of Public Health Dietetic Internship addresses a longstanding need to train and retain dietitians in Arizona. Populations of recent immigrants and minorities are rapidly growing in the United States; the ethnic distribution of nutrition and dietetics practitioners does not mirror the population. This internship adds to the diversity of RDNs within Arizona. The leadership of this internship wants to keep the WIC track accessible to eligible candidates after the graduate degree requirement takes effect in 2024. WIC-track Dietetic Internship candidates might want a Master's of Public Health degree and to be accepted into an internship before committing to a master's degree program. An online survey

was distributed to 160 recipients to identify degree preferences of potential WIC-track candidates. Recipients were requested to forward the survey link to coworkers not on the distribution list. Of 232 respondents, 57 (27%) were interested in becoming an RDN and willing to take the necessary steps. Those who were interested in becoming an RDN and Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) graduates desiring to become RDNs had similar interest in each proposed degree area. A relatively even split occurred between respondents who were and were not willing to start a master's degree program before first being admitted to an internship. The initial hypotheses were rejected. The Maricopa County Department of Public Health decided to allow WIC-track interns to choose their degree to meet the future educational requirements for becoming an RDN. This may be a good model for other organizations that could provide accredited supervised practice to increase diversity within the profession while keeping the higher educational requirements attainable.

WIC

WIC is a federal grant program that provides supplemental foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, health screenings, and referrals to community-based programs and services to low-income families. Eligible program participants include low-income pregnant, postpartum, and lactating women, infants, and children up until the child's 5th birthday.¹ WIC began as a pilot program in 1972 and became a permanent federal grant program in 1974.² In 2013, 14.19 million people in the United States were eligible for the WIC program; however, only 8.55 million were participating.³

Within the WIC program, state and local agencies are able to determine the most appropriate methods of nutrition education for their particular populations⁴; however, a specific percentage of the budget must be spent on the nutrition education component compared with the supplemental food package component.⁵ As a result, staffing varies greatly among WIC agencies. Local clinics average three full-time equivalents (FTEs) for small caseloads to 10 FTEs per clinic with large caseloads. RDNs are used for nutrition education in 58% of WIC clinics nationwide.⁴ RDNs do not generally see all types of WIC participants; typical roles for RDNs include the development of educational materials, provision of nutrition education to high-risk participants, and management of clinics and local agencies.⁶

Populations of recent immigrants and minorities are rapidly growing in the United States.⁷ Cultural competence is essential to effectively serve diverse populations.⁶ Increasing the diversity of RDNs within WIC will help to improve the care provided to clients. In 2013, 56.7% of WIC-eligible infants and children in the Western region (which includes Arizona) were reported to be Hispanic, and 26.2% were reported to be a race other than white.⁸ In July 2015, an estimated 6.8 million people lived in Arizona; a reported 30.7% of the population was Hispanic or Latino, and 16.5% reported a race other than white.⁹ In contrast, a recent survey indicated that 4% of nutrition and dietetics practitioners are Hispanic or Latino, and 9% reported a race other than white.¹⁰

FUTURE OF DIETETICS

The US population is aging, and many nutrition and dietetics practitioners

This article was written by Jennifer L. Hernandez, MS, RDN, a dietetic internship director, Maricopa County Department of Public Health, Phoenix, AZ; Laura A. Weber, MEd, RDN, IBCLC, WIC director, Jefferson Franklin Community Action Corporation, Hillsboro, MO (at the time of the study, she was the WIC dietetic internship coordinator—Maricopa County Department of Public Health, Phoenix, AZ); and Sara Horner, MPH, an analyst, Tempe, AZ (at the time of the study, she was an evaluator, Maricopa County Department of Public Health, Phoenix, AZ).

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are anticipated to retire out of the workforce over approximately the next decade. Based on the current numbers of nutrition and dietetics practitioners, future practitioners, and attrition from the workforce, a shortfall of 18,000 FTEs is anticipated by the year 2020. Within community nutrition, which includes nutrition and dietetics practitioners in WIC, the shortfall is estimated to be 2,900 FTEs.¹¹ For this reason, keeping dietetic education accessible to competent future practitioners is important.

Entry-level degree requirements for almost all health care practitioners have increased since 2000. Occupational therapy¹² and nurse practitioners¹³ have options for entry-level practice at both the master's and doctorate levels; physical therapy¹⁴ and pharmacy¹⁵ both confer their entry-level degrees at the doctorate level only. As a result, the Council on Future Practice recommended an increase in the degree requirements for RDNs. The Commission on Dietetic Registration has mandated that all newly eligible candidates for the Registration Examination for Dietitians have at least a master's degree beginning January 1, 2024.¹⁶ The Commission on Dietetic Registration has also published a variety of student option scenarios for how students and programs may comply with this new requirement.¹⁷

As a free-standing program, the Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) Dietetic Internship has the option of accepting interns with or without a master's degree. Regardless of which option is selected, graduates of the internship must have completed a master's degree before being eligible to take the Registration Examination for Dietitian Nutritionists. Not everyone who begins a degree completes it, and those who do not complete a degree will be ineligible to sit for the registration examination. Nationwide, dietetic internships have a 50% match rate.¹⁸ Taking all of this into account, and not wanting to give valuable internship spots to those who will never be eligible to take the registration examination, we determined that candidates should have completed the master's degree before beginning the MCDPH Dietetic Internship.

THE MARICOPA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH WIC TRACK DIETETICS INTERNSHIP

The WIC track of the Dietetic Internship is a collaborative project between MCDPH, the Arizona Department of Health Services, and the United States Department of Agriculture that addresses a long-standing need to train and retain public health dietitians in rural counties of Arizona. Eligible candidates must have completed DPD requirements and worked full time for an Arizona WIC program local agency for at least 1 year before the start of the internship. Interns complete the program part time while continuing to work at their local agency. In exchange for completing the internship free of charge and receiving their full salary and benefits throughout the program, interns commit to working at their local agency for 3 years after internship completion. The first class of WIC-track interns graduated in 2012, and the program has placed 22 RDNs into the Arizona WIC program.

The WIC track of the Dietetic Internship adds to the diversity of RDNs within the state of Arizona. Twelve of the 28 (43%) dietetic interns and graduates of the WIC track have reported an ethnicity other than non-Hispanic white, as compared with 9 of 30 (30%) traditional full-time track dietetic interns in the same time-frame. Rates of reporting additional language competency were similar among the two tracks (8 of 28 for the WIC track and 10 of 30 for the full-time track).

One barrier to increasing diversity in dietetics is the perception that the academic and internship requirements were difficult to attain or complete.^{6,19} Greenwald and Davis¹⁹ reported on a Dietetic Internship program, similar to the WIC track, that presumed that many interns would not have been able to obtain a position in other internships because of their DPD grades. The MCDPH Dietetic Internship has seen similar demographics. The mean grade point average of WIC-track interns has been 3.22 (standard deviation=0.33; range=2.7 to 3.86) as compared with 3.56 (standard deviation=0.29;

How many years have you been working at WIC?
For what agency do you currently work?
What is your highest level of education?
Are you interested in becoming a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN)?
Do you have your Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) Verification Statement?
What month and year did you obtain your DPD Verification Statement?
What type of master's program appeals to you?
Is it important to you to complete your degree alongside the peers in your dietetic internship class?
Does supporting a local Arizona university or college matter to you?
Would you be willing to obtain your master's degree and complete academic coursework:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On your own time • With your own money • Both • Neither
Do you know if your WIC agency provides tuition reimbursement?
Would you be willing to start a master's program prior to acceptance into the internship?

Figure 1. Survey questions of Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) employees in Arizona to identify interest in becoming registered dietitian nutritionists.

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