

THE FUTURE OF REGISTERED DIETITIAN NUTRITIONISTS IN FOODSERVICE MANAGEMENT: MILLENNIAL STUDENTS' CAREER MOTIVATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Food and nutrition management is the fastest growing non-clinical sector of dietetics. Existing research suggests little awareness among dietetic students of careers in this sector. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate career motivations and aspirations of millennial dietetic students. Four focus groups of dietetic students were conducted at two universities and analyzed using the constant comparative method. Six themes emerged: anticipated career path, factors driving career decision, appealing and unappealing aspects of foodservice management, image of a foodservice RDN, and ideas to elevate awareness. Educators and industry professionals may use these findings to recruit dietetic students into foodservice management careers.

Keywords: foodservice management, registered dietitian nutritionists, millennial

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INTRODUCTION

Food and nutrition management is the fastest growing non-clinical sector of dietetics and is expected to grow by 35% from 2010 to 2020. Factors driving this trend include an aging population, changes in health care law, the growing prevalence of diet-related conditions, and the growth of the food industry (Hooker, Williams, Papneja, Sen, & Hogan, 2012). At present, an estimated 10% of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) are employed in food and nutrition management (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2018). These figures likely encompass multiple sectors of management, including foodservice management, clinical nutrition management, or management of community nutrition programs.

Despite employment statistics for RDNs working in this sector, existing research indicates very little awareness of this career path among dietetic students (Holsipple, 1994; Hughes & Desbrow, 2005). In past studies, dietetic students identified areas of interest as health, disease, and health care; teaching and health promotion; sports and fitness; counseling and behavior change; food and cooking; private practice counseling (Markley & Huyck, 1992). Factors influencing students' career paths were interesting work, a secure future, and advancement potential (Holsipple, 1994). Though these aims may be aligned with food and nutrition management, there appears to be little recognition among students that a career in this sector will satisfy these aims.

However, the existing data does not distinguish between foodservice management, clinical nutrition management, or community nutrition management. Also, the existing data is up to two decades old and

does not account for the unique career aspirations and motivations of the millennial generation, or those born between 1980 and 1999 that will comprise nearly two decades of the future workforce (National Chamber Foundation, 2012).

Career Aspirations of the Millennial Generation

Current research on the millennial generation suggests that pay is the single most important motivating factor in pursuing a career path (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Millennials hold high expectations for career advancement, promotions, and pay raises, though oftentimes without the requisite effort (Erickson, 2009).

While pay has been cited as a driving factor, millennials are also seeking careers that are meaningful and satisfying (Yang & Guy, 2006). The social aspect of work is highly valued, which may include collaborative projects, friendships with coworkers, and continuous feedback from supervisors (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Lastly, work-life balance is highly valued, though personal life may often be prioritized over work (Zhang et al., 2007).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate the career motivations and aspirations of millennial dietetic students. The objectives were to: 1) identify the factors influencing dietetic students' preferred career paths, 2) characterize dietetic students' feelings towards foodservice management as a career path and 3) generate discussion on ways to increase awareness and interest in foodservice management.

METHODS

This grounded theory study is organized and reported according to the American Psychological Association Journal Article Reporting Standards (2018). Institutional review board approval from the researchers' home institution was obtained prior to study initiation.

Data collection involved focus group interviews of three to six participants per group. Focus groups were chosen given that the solicited information was not highly sensitive and that participants were likely to know one another and generate rich dialogue (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). A total of four focus groups were conducted in the spring semester of 2016 at two private, Midwestern universities with nutrition programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND, 2018). The focus groups ranged from 60 to 90 minutes with an average of 80 minutes and were conducted in an empty classroom at one of the study sites.

Participants were recruited by email invitation from their respective program directors. Random selection was used when more than six students expressed interest in the study. An online poll was deployed to schedule the focus group interview at a convenient time. Inclusion criteria were that students be 18-32 years of age at the time of data collection and enrolled in a program accredited by ACEND; students that were under 18 years of age, older than 32 years of age, or not

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enrolled in an accredited program were excluded. Verbal consent was obtained prior to participation. Participants received a \$50 gift card as remuneration.

The research team consisted of two faculty members at one of the study sites; both had a foodservice and/or culinary nutrition background. Many of the students were known by the faculty members as students or dietetic interns. In order to communicate that participation was not viewed favorably by the faculty members, students were ensured that their interest in the study would in no way affect their academic progress. However, the pre-existing rapport did allow for rich dialogue during the focus group discussions. Several of the participants were unknown to the faculty members at the time of data collection given their home institution or level in the program.

The discussion guide was semi-structured in nature and allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions; this invited a degree of reflexivity where the researcher provided more probing questions based on her own experiences. Participants were also encouraged to ask one another follow-up questions if they wished. A series of seven open-ended discussion questions pertained to students' career path, what factors were important in a future career, their views on foodservice management as a career path, and ideas to increase awareness of careers in this sector; see Table 1.

The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim to a word document, and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2003). Each researcher utilized inductive open coding by hand with frequency estimates expressed as percentages. The researchers jointly grouped the codes into themes and justified each with verbatim quotes. Data were triangulated by recruiting participants from two different institutions and three different education levels: undergraduate bachelors of science, combined masters of science and dietetic internship, and masters of science with an existing RDN credential.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four focus groups were conducted; each group ranged from three to six participants with an average of five participants per group. Of the 19 focus group participants, 17 (89%) were female and two (11%) male. Regarding program level, nine (47%) were undergraduate students, six (32%) were in a combined masters of science and dietetic internship program, and four (21%) were masters of science students with an existing RDN credential. Most participants had previous foodservice experience in various settings such as a restaurant or bar (68%), during their dietetic internship (47%), a hospital or long-term care facility (26%), K-12 foodservice (21%), university foodservice (16%), children's summer camp (11%), grocery

store (11%), hotel (5%), catering company (5%), or sports or athletic facility (5%). See Table 2 for details of the demographic information.

Six major themes emerged from the data analysis. These included: anticipated career path, factors driving career decision, appealing aspects of foodservice management, unappealing aspects of foodservice management, image of a foodservice dietitian, and ideas to elevate awareness.

Career Paths and Driving Factors of Dietetic Students

The first two themes characterized participants' anticipated career paths and the factors driving their decisions; the supporting subthemes are reported in Table 3. The vast majority of participants (79%) anticipated holding multiple jobs throughout their careers, and most (63%) planned to start their careers in clinical dietetics. Reasons to support this subtheme were to "build up that resume," to expand the "breadth of your knowledge" or "gain experience." Other participants cited the perceived ease of securing a clinical dietetics position as their rationale. One student described this as "an easy entrance into the career field."

Participants identified multiple sectors of desired employment, either as their first job or following a tenure in clinical dietetics. These included community dietetics (42%), private practice or entrepreneurship (26%), academia or research (21%), outpatient counseling (16%), sports nutrition (11%), school food (11%), culinary nutrition (11%), foodservice management (11%), maternal nutrition (5%), food media (5%) and global nutrition (5%).

These findings offer a different perspective on dietetic students' career perspectives. Existing research suggests that dietetic students had little knowledge of the profession itself, but generally identified a desire to pursue a career in science, biology, health care, or human health (Brady et al., 2012; Holsipple, 1994; Hughes & Desbrow, 2005; Lordly & MacLellan, 2012). In this study, participants not only identified broad sectors of dietetics (i.e. clinical dietetics, community nutrition, foodservice management), but had visions for more niche career opportunities, such as sports nutrition, culinary nutrition, maternal nutrition, food media, and global nutrition. This suggests awareness of unique career opportunities is increasing among dietetic students.

Next, participants cited multiple factors driving their career decisions. Flexibility was the most commonly cited factor (68%). Participants described this both as flexibility within a job, such as working part-time or "choosing your own hours," as well as flexibility throughout their careers by changing jobs. One participant describe this as "You don't have to be stuck in something. You have options to go somewhere else at any point."

Table 1: Focus Group Discussion Guide Pertaining to Millennial Dietetic Students' Career Aspirations, Career Motivations, and Perceptions of Careers in Foodservice Management.

Question Number	Question
1	In what sector of dietetics do you hope to be employed, and why? General sectors include: clinical dietetics; community dietetics; food and nutrition management; culinary arts; education and research; private practice; entrepreneurship.
2	What factors are most important to you when pursuing a future career?
3	Have you had any experience working in food service management? If so, how would you describe your experience?
4	When you picture a career as a nutrition professional working in food service management, what comes to mind?
5	What do you find appealing about working in food service management as a registered dietitian?
6	What do you find unappealing about working in food service management as a registered dietitian?
7	Research shows very little awareness of careers in food service management among nutrition and dietetics students. Why do you think this is? What do you think can be done to improve awareness of careers in this sector?

Table 2: Demographics and Foodservice Experience of Dietetics Students in Focus Groups. (n=19)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	17	89%
Male	2	11%
Level		
Undergraduate	9	47%
Dietetic Intern	6	32%
Graduate Assistant, with RD	4	21%
Institution		
Saint Louis University	16	84%
Fontbonne University	3	16%
Foodservice experience		
Restaurant/bar	13	68%
Dietetic internship	9	47%
Hospital/long-term care facility	5	26%
K-12 foodservice	4	21%
University foodservice	3	16%
Children's summer camp	2	11%
Grocery store	2	11%
Hotel	1	5%
Catering company	1	5%
Sports/athletic facility	1	5%

The second most commonly cited factor was making a difference or helping others (47%). This was described as “feeling like I would make an impact in some way” or simply “helping others.” One participant described, “I wanted a job where I felt like I actually felt like I had a purpose and I was making a difference.”

Other factors cited as influencing career decisions were the culture or work environment (47%), enjoyment and happiness (42%), money (42%), feeling challenged (26%), stability or security (21%), patient interaction (16%), location (16%), opportunity to advance (11%), work-life balance (11%), full-time status (11%), the opportunity to create a position (5%), benefits (5%), and power (5%).

These findings were somewhat consistent with related studies of the millennial student generation. Competitive pay, career advancement opportunities, and work-life balance were top motivators in the existing research on millennial students across various disciplines (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010; Zhang et al., 2007). In this study, similar subthemes of “money,” “opportunity to advance” and “work-life balance” arose, but were not the most commonly cited factors influencing career decisions. Other findings suggested that meaningful work is highly important to millennial students (Erickson, 2009; Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010; Yang & Guy, 2006); this was consistent with the finding in this study that “making a difference or helping others” was cited as important by nearly half the participants.

The most frequently cited factor among participants in this study was flexibility. This was consistent with the aforementioned theme of anticipated career path. Though dietetic students are committed to the profession overall, they anticipate changing positions and sectors of employment throughout their careers. This level of flexibility

Table 3: Career Paths and Driving Factors of Dietetics Students. (n=19)

Theme	Code	Frequency	Percentage
Anticipated career path	Multiple jobs	15	79%
	First job: clinical	12	63%
	Community dietetics	8	42%
	Private practice/entrepreneurship	5	26%
	Academia/research	4	21%
	Outpatient counseling	3	16%
	Sports nutrition	2	11%
	School food	2	11%
	Culinary nutrition	2	11%
	Foodservice management	2	11%
	Maternal nutrition	1	5%
	Food media	1	5%
	Global nutrition	1	5%
	Factors driving career decision	Flexibility	13
Making a difference/helping others		10	53%
Culture/work environment		9	47%
Enjoyment/happiness		8	42%
Money		8	42%
Feeling challenged		5	26%
Stability/security		4	21%
Patient interaction		3	16%
Location		3	16%
Opportunity to advance		2	11%
Work-life balance		2	11%
Full-time status		2	11%
Opportunity to create a position		1	5%
Benefits		1	5%
Power		1	5%

appears to be one of the most appealing aspects of the dietetics profession.

Dietetic Students' Perceptions of a Career in Foodservice Management

The next three themes that emerged captured dietetic students' perceptions of a career in foodservice management; see Table 4 for the supporting subthemes. Students identified both appealing and unappealing aspects of a career in this sector, as well as their overall image of a foodservice management dietitian.

Factors cited as appealing included high pay (32%) and multiple roles or multitasking (32%). The latter was described as the "jack of all trades" and "superwoman." One participant commented, "You have to know how to fix the printer. You have to know how to cook the food. You have to know how to write a menu." The other appealing aspects of foodservice management cited by participants were: working in unique settings (32%), direct involvement in nutrition delivery or working with food (32%), leadership or advancement opportunities (14%), menu planning (11%) and organization (5%).

On the flip side, the need for multitasking likely corresponded to the most commonly cited unappealing aspects of foodservice management: stress (21%) and long hours (21%). One student voiced the concern that "In a hospital, maybe your shift sometimes is like, not going to end...just because of things that might come up." The remaining unappealing aspects cited by participants were lack of patient interaction or gratitude (16%), rules and regulations (11%), grunt work (11%) and participation in food waste (5%).

The participants' image of a foodservice management dietitian was prompted by the discussion question, "When you picture a career as a nutrition professional working in foodservice management, what comes to mind?" The supporting subthemes somewhat reiterated the factors cited in the previous themes and were largely informed by participants' own experiences shadowing or working under a foodservice management dietitian. The most commonly cited characteristic was stress (74%). One student described her preceptor from her dietetic internship: "She [preceptor] was just so stressed all the time, dealing with all complaints and employees and just always running around. She never sat down." Another student reflected on her foodservice management rotation of her dietetic internship: "Sometimes I would just have these nightmares about it...something going wrong...I'd wake up and be like, 'Ahh!'"

The remaining subthemes that captured participants' image of a foodservice management dietitian included specific tasks, skills, or traits associated with a foodservice management dietitian. These included: managing employees (47%), a basement office (42%), long hours (42%), specific tasks such as managing Excel spreadsheets, budgeting, ordering, menu creation, paperwork, and tray testing (37%), responsibility (21%), being underappreciated (21%), high pay (16%), multitasking (16%), rules, limitations, or policies (11%), problem solving (11%), hairnets (11%), talking about food (5%), food waste (5%) and being dirty (5%).

These findings offer a new contribution to the existing literature. Whereas past studies have identified low awareness of foodservice management as a viable career option for dietitians (Holsipple, 1994; Hughes & Desbrow, 2005), the participants in this study were able to

Table 4: Dietetics Students' Perceptions of a Dietetics Career in Foodservice Management. (n=19)

Theme	Code	Frequency	Percentage
Appealing aspects of foodservice management	High pay	6	32%
	Multiple roles/multitasking	6	32%
	Working in unique settings	6	32%
	Direct involvement in nutrition delivery/working with food	4	21%
	Leadership/advancement opportunities	3	16%
	Menu planning	2	11%
Unappealing aspects of foodservice management	Organization	1	5%
	Stress	4	21%
	Long hours	4	21%
	Lack of patient interaction/gratitude	3	16%
	Rules/regulations	2	11%
	Grunt work	2	11%
Image of a foodservice management dietitian	Food waste	1	5%
	Stress	14	74%
	Managing employees	9	47%
	Basement office	8	42%
	Long hours	8	42%
	Tasks: Excel spreadsheets, budgeting, ordering, menu creation, paperwork, tray testing	7	37%
	Creativity	5	26%
	Responsibility	4	21%
	Strong personality	4	21%
	Underappreciated	4	21%
	High pay	3	16%
	Multitasking	3	16%
	Rules/limitations/policies	2	11%
	Problem solving	2	11%
	Hairnets	2	11%
Talking about food	1	5%	
Food waste	1	5%	
Being dirty	1	5%	

identify vivid traits associated with this employment sector. Regardless of whether the traits named were entirely accurate, dietetic students were not only aware of the career opportunities in foodservice management, but could free associate a myriad of both positive and negative traits.

These findings suggest that students are sensitive to the unique personalities or roles that a RDN would have in various employment sectors. A team of Australian researchers identified associations between RDNs' personality profiles and different areas of practice; those with a personality characterized by low harm avoidance and high self-directedness were four times more likely to have worked in foodservice management compared with RDNs characterized by high harm avoidance and low self-directedness (Ball, Eley, Desbrow, Lee & Ferguson, 2016). In this study, some students reported alignment with the perceived personality of a foodservice management dietitian ("That's probably why it appeals to me. My life is multitasking and stress. That's just what I am used to.") Others reported a sense of misalignment ("I just really didn't enjoy my day-to-day tasks in that [foodservice management] position.").

Dietetic Students' Ideas to Elevate Awareness of Careers in Foodservice Management

The final theme that emerged captured student ideas to elevate awareness of careers in foodservice management; see Table 5 for the supporting subthemes. Curricular suggestions included a career seminar class (42%), a cooking or foodservice class (37%), a foodservice practicum (16%) or a senior-level medical nutrition therapy culinary lab (11%). One student suggested "mandatory cooking classes that every single nutrition major has to take" while another suggested "incorporating it [foodservice management] into more than one class." Among college and university educators, heightened attention has focused on promoting culinary education within a traditional dietetics curriculum (Begley, 2010; Cooper, Mezzabotta, & Murphy, 2017). The findings of this study suggest that students see culinary arts and foodservice management as closely related.

Other suggestions included guest speakers (37%) and a faculty member with a foodservice management focus (26%). To support the latter, one participant recalled the impact of one of her professors, "[Faculty name] was a real influence on SLU students. She was...the only dietitian in our department that was super enthusiastic about foodservice. Those are the people you look up to." In contrast, another participant recalled the lack of faculty with a focus in foodservice management. He commented, "My undergraduate program was literally called Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics and we didn't have one faculty member that had a background in foodservice that I know of." A third participant commented, "I think that sends the message...if your professors aren't talking about, like, the fact that

foodservice is an equally viable career path, then it's no surprise that people maybe see it as lesser than as like, a choice."

While colleges and universities accredited by ACEND are required to meet competencies specific to foodservice management, institutions are not necessarily required to employ faculty members with this specific expertise. As a best practice, academic departments may strive to hire faculty members with a diverse array of expertise that includes foodservice management.

Another suggestion was stronger collaboration between a university's nutrition department and business school (26%). Participants explained that nutrition students take required courses in the business school, but that business students are not encouraged to take food-related courses. Foodservice management was described as a career path between nutrition and business that "bridges the two" and served as a "middle point between those two careers."

Remaining suggestions included exposure to a strong foodservice management rotation in the dietetic internship (11%), participation in university operations (5%) and promoting relevant summer jobs (5%). These subthemes emerged from students' own experiences as dietetic interns or foodservice employees. For instance, students reported both positive and negative experiences with foodservice management during their dietetic internships. One student recalled, "My foodservice rotation as an intern was highly disappointing. I spent two whole days on the dish team, and to be honest, I called in sick one of those days because I was like, 'This is absolutely not beneficial to my learning experience. I have ran a dishwasher before.'" Meanwhile, a student recalled a positive memory of her preceptors: "They [preceptors] were all great, I will say that. They were all very invested in my experience and ensuring that I learned from the experience." Another participant reflected, "Your preceptor makes or breaks everything." The former finding is consistent with the existing understanding on the impact that preceptors play on dietetic students' confidence and professional socialization (MacLellan & Lordly, 2008). Program directors may play an important role in identifying sites that are committed to providing high quality foodservice experiences and by training preceptors on the ACEND competency requirements associated with foodservice rotations.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

These study findings may be applicable to both industry professionals and educators. While only 11% of participants identified an interest in foodservice management as a career path within dietetics, this figure does reflect the estimated 10% of practicing RDNs employed in food and nutrition management (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2018). Whether or not the workforce will adapt to the projected growth of food and nutrition management and its multiple sectors is unknown, as is the projected growth over the next decade. It is also

Table 5: Dietetics Students' Ideas to Elevate Awareness of Careers in Foodservice Management. (n=19)

Theme	Code	Frequency	Percentage
Ideas to elevate awareness	Career seminar class	8	42%
	Cooking/foodservice class	7	37%
	Guest speakers	7	37%
	Faculty with foodservice management focus	5	26%
	Collaboration between nutrition department and business school	5	26%
	Foodservice practicum	3	16%
	Senior-level medical nutrition therapy culinary lab	2	11%
	Strong foodservice management rotation in dietetic internship	2	11%
	Participation in university operations	1	5%
	Summer jobs	1	5%

notable that foodservice management may not be considered an entry-level position, depending on the title or required years of experience. Future research may further explore the career path of RDNs practicing in this sector through their academic training, professional training, and career paths.

Educators may also pay close attention to the ideas generated by students on how to raise and sustain awareness of careers in foodservice management. It is notable that most participants did actually have an awareness of foodservice management of a career path, yet did not identify it as a preferred career path. However, this does suggest progress from earlier studies that identified little awareness of foodservice management as an employment opportunity for RDNs (Holsipple, 1994; Hughes & Desbrow, 2005). Many of the ideas suggested by students were curricular in nature, such as a career seminar class, while others related to the administration of dietetics programs, such as the makeup of faculty. Given that the most frequently cited subthemes included a career seminar class or cooking/foodservice class, program directors may ensure that didactic learning is providing adequate preparation for supervised practice placements and graduate coursework. Future research may explore the effectiveness and extent to which foodservice management is integrated into existing curriculums.

Demand for dietetics professionals in food and nutrition management was projected to grow by 35% from 2010 to 2020 (Hooker, Williams, Papneja, Sen, & Hogan, 2012). Industry professionals may consider both the perceived appealing and unappealing aspects of foodservice management when recruiting and retaining high quality employees. Emphasizing the appealing aspects, such as pay, having multiple roles or multitasking, or the opportunity to work in unique setting may capitalize in students pre-existing interests. On the other hand, employers may directly address the perceived unappealing aspects of foodservice management, such as stress and long hours. Employers may also consider that flexibility, making a difference or helping others, and the culture or work environment were identified as the greatest factors driving participants' career decisions; these may be considered when recruiting and retaining high quality employees.

One limitation to this study was that the researchers knew many of the participants and had held professional roles in foodservice or culinary nutrition; this may have biased participants' answers during the focus groups. A second limitation was the use of two somewhat similar institutions. Both study sites were private Midwestern universities. Therefore, the generalizability may be limited to similar institutions. Future research may include public institutions and those located throughout various geographic regions of the United States.

The need for RDNs in food and nutrition management is growing. While students are aware of foodservice management as a career path, most continue to show little interest. Educators and industry professionals may play an active role in guiding students towards this career path in order to support the demand for qualified and competent foodservice management RDNs.

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