

# EXPLORING ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES IN DIETETICS



FRANCISCAN  
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## Introduction

While RDNs can be found in an abundance of settings, public policy plays an intricate role in every area of focus for the profession of dietetics. Collaboration among nutrition experts, researchers, advocates, and policymakers is critical in policy interventions to improve health outcomes. However, effective nutrition policies by governments have been hindered in the past by insufficient knowledge, capacity, and will. The purpose of dietetic internships is to educate dietetic interns in advocacy and public policy. The way in which this competency is satisfied is at the discretion of dietetic internship program directors and varies in method and depth. The purpose of this study was to determine dietetic educators' strategies and perceptions related to intern education in advocacy and public policy as well as to identify opportunities to increase dietetic intern engagement and interest. It is imperative that RDNs become more engaged in advocacy and public policy by not only understanding and applying evidence-based practices but acknowledging that advocating is every RDNs professional responsibility. Should this be the case, the ability to create positive units of change within the profession of dietetics as well as within the community would be within reach. Entry-level RDNs should have knowledge and confidence in policymaking and understand the value of engagement in an effort to bridge the gap of validation among other healthcare professionals, prioritize dietetics research and practice, deliver quality of care, and obtain reimbursement for services. It is crucial that the prioritization of educating dietetic interns in policy and advocacy be further emphasized to secure a future for dietetic practitioners (Teng et al., 2019). The study concluded that dietetic educators should implement a more robust advocacy and public policy component and collaborate with other dietetic educators across the board to share ideas and instill standard methods of executing this competency (Lordly, 2007).

## Participants

The final sample consisted of a combination of DI directors, coordinators, and one RDN, with an emphasis on DI directors. All the participants were female and over the age of 18-years-old. The reason behind all-female participants is due to the profession of dietetics being predominately female. The sample included twelve DI directors, one assistant director, two DI coordinators, one didactic program in dietetics (DPD) director, and one recently credentialed RDN, bringing the total to sixteen participants involved in the study. Additionally, eleven participants identified as a dietetics professor, with nine participants teaching on the graduate level and two participants teaching on the undergraduate level. In total, six participants possessed a Doctorate, nine participants held a Master's, with the remaining participant having earned an advanced practitioner (RDN-AP) credential. fifteen licensed RDNs and one nutrition and dietetics technician, registered (NDTR) comprised the study. Other noteworthy positions held by participants consisted of one member of the Academy's House of Delegates (HOD), two state-level Academy presidents, three state-level Academy public policy coordinators, one district legislative ambassador, and one area coordinator for NDEP. Participants were dispersed across all 5 regions of the U.S.

## Methods

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to build a consensus from dietetic internship program directors regarding their opinion on the relevance, perceived interest, educational strategies, and recommendations for improving dietetic internships surrounding the required advocacy and public policy competency. Data from semi-structured interviews was utilized. All but one of the sixteen interviews were conducted via Zoom recording and transcribed thereafter. Because this study involved human subjects, the research design and study protocol were first approved by the Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady Institutional Review Board. Recruitment commenced by the research chair sending a nationwide email to DI directors inquiring about their interest in participating. Once IRB approved the study, the PI selectively recruited participants by initiating a web-based search for "public policy and dietetic internship" in effort to identify internships that advertise themselves as having a public policy focus. From there, the PI utilized the Academy's Accredited Program Directory on its website. All participants contacted by the PI were sent a recruitment email. Prospective participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured Zoom meeting with the principal investigator. A total of 146 emails were distributed to DI directors across the nation of which sixteen responded and agreed to participate in the study, meaning that every nine emails sent yielded one participant. Purposive sampling was used to select the study participants. All participants who responded to the recruitment efforts of the PI and met the inclusion criteria of the study were selected. Inclusion criteria included participants being an active or recently retired DI director or DI coordinator. One RDN was included because a director who was interviewed recommended that the PI interview this individual to better understand the reason for her receptiveness to advocacy and public policy during her DI and the ways in which she is still actively involved. Additionally, one DPD program director was interviewed due to a theme that emerged related to undergraduate education during data analysis. Data collection for the study began on September 2, 2021, and was discontinued on October 19, 2021. Data collection was conducted via Zoom. After the interviews were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed using a program called Otter.ai. The researcher then manually checked the transcriptions for accuracy on multiple occasions. All participants were forwarded their respective transcript to member check the authenticity of the transcription. No participants reported necessary changes to the transcriptions. Possible external threats during data collection include interpretive validity that can occur during the transcription of data from audio recordings converted to written responses. To mitigate this, a transcription program (Otter.ai) was utilized and the PI manually compared the transcriptions to the audio recording to ensure accuracy. Data collected during participant interviews were analyzed to determine common themes that exist within data sets and thus, coding and thematic analysis were applied. This allowed the researcher to interpret the data among recorded interview responses to better understand the lack of participation and/or interest in policy and advocacy. Data were de-identified to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Each participant was assigned a PI-generated identification number. Because the study was deemed secondary research, informed consent was not required. Implied consent was implicitly granted through participants' elective involvement in the study.

## Results

Each participant responded to four semi-structured interview questions related to their beliefs, experiences, and professional point of view surrounding advocacy and public policy in the field of nutrition and dietetics. Pertinent themes that emerged were that dietetic educators should implement a more robust advocacy and public policy component, collaborate with other educators to share ideas, and instill standard methods of meeting this competency-based requirement.

**Table 1**  
*The Sixteen Participants' Geographical Location in the U.S.*

West Region	Oregon, Nevada, and California
Southwest Region	Texas (2)
Midwest Region	Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan (2)
Southeast Region	Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, and Virginia (2)
Northeast Region	Massachusetts (2)

The first interview question asked, "What is your perception of the importance of educating interns regarding policy and advocacy as it relates to the profession of dietetics?" 3 themes emerged from the first research question: Sixteen (100%) agreed that advocacy and public policy is important to the past, present, and future of the profession, eleven (68.8%) described advocacy and public policy as RDNs' professional responsibility, and 7 (43.8%) reported comprehension deficiencies as a recursive issue. The second research question read, "According to a 2017 article, only 3% of active members of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics participate in action alerts. Why do you think this may be?" Two themes emerged: Twelve (75.0%) participants reported prospective and current RDNs struggle with comprehending advocacy and public policy, resulting in low engagement, while 5 (31.3%) reported email overload as a contributing factor. The third question was, "How does your internship program satisfy the advocacy requirement CRDN 2.14—Demonstrate advocacy on local, state, or national legislative and regulatory issues or policies impacting the nutrition and dietetics profession?" 8 (50.0%) participants stated they have interns participate in a public policy workshop followed by a written assignment and 7 (43.8%) instruct interns to contact local legislators regarding any policy-related issue. The final question was, "How can dietetics programs like FranU better meet CRDN 2.14 in the future with an aim to increase the interest of future RDNs?" Eleven (68.8%) participants suggested incorporating in-person interactive activities with legislators and policymakers. 7 (43.8%) dietetic educators assign interactive projects on current policy-related issues. 5 (31.3%) stated that undergraduate educators should ensure they are emphasizing the relevance and importance of advocacy and public policy engagement to students. Finally, 5 (31.3%) recommended the Academy's Policy and Advocacy Rotation.

**Table 2**  
*Dietetic Educators' Perceptions, Educational Strategies, and Recommendations on How to Increase the Interest in Advocacy & Public Policy Among Future RDNs*

Participants		n	Percent (%)
<b>General Thoughts on Advocacy and Public Policy in the Field of Nutrition and Dietetics</b>	Is Important	16	100%
	Professional Responsibility	11	68.8%
	Recursive Knowledge Deficit	7	43.8%
<b>Thoughts on Why 3% of Academy Members Participate in Action Alerts</b>	Lack of Comprehension	12	75.0%
	Email Overload	5	31.3%
<b>Thoughts on How Programs Currently Satisfy CRDN 2.14</b>	Public Policy Workshop	8	50.0%
	Write a Letter to Legislator	7	43.8%
<b>Thoughts on How Dietetic Internships Can Better Meet CRDN 2.14 to Increase Interest</b>	In-Person Interactive Activity with Legislators	11	68.8%
	Educate/Assign Projects on Current Policy-Related Issues	7	43.8%
	Increase Undergraduate Advocacy and Policy Rigor	5	31.3%
	Offer AND's Policy and Advocacy Rotation	5	31.3%

## Discussion

Just as the research articulated, the results of the study confirmed high variability among DI program directors' method of choice in delivering the advocacy and public policy competency to interns. The results aligned with recent research that concluded dietetic educators should implement a more robust advocacy and public policy component and collaborate with other dietetic educators to share ideas and instill standard methods of executing this competency. (Lordly, 2007). This study supports the notion that final-year dietetics students' readiness to practice should be addressed to produce professionally mature RDNs (Teng et al., 2019). While dietetic educators deemed advocacy and public policy a professional responsibility, participants also described comprehension issues as a longstanding problem (Edelstein, 2012). Interestingly, the most common practice for satisfying CRDN 2.14 was to write a letter to a legislator, which was also reported as a common undergraduate assignment, indicative of an insufficient degree of complexity in DIs. Endorsed strategies among dietetic educators included participation in hands-on policy-related issues, such as offering the Academy's Nutrition and Dietetics Policy and Advocacy Rotation. This would increase undergraduate rigor in DIs by offering an extension of previously acquired knowledge. Therefore, implementation of standardized guidelines for DIs would bridge the gap between advocacy and public policy and prospective RDN stakeholders.



Participant 14 stated, "You can't have a hall with three people in it and call it Advocacy Day. Since all the internships in our state collaborate on meeting the advocacy and policy competency, we have 100 plus interns between us. We can fill the halls and make it real."

## Conclusion

In order to increase collaboration, improve method of delivery, and manifest perceived value in advocacy and public policy education in DIs, collaboration among DI directors during the annual NDEP meeting would be beneficial. Because this study was conducted on a national level and participants were from every region of the country, the results and recommendations of this study are transferrable to DIs across the board. If deemed necessary, future studies could explore advocacy and public policy knowledge-based educational strategies at the undergraduate level.

## References (QR code)

