EXPLORING ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES IN DIETETICS

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Introduction

While RDNs can be found in an abundance of settings, public policy plays an intrinsic 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 dietetics is to educate dietetic interns in advocacy and public policy. The way in which this competency is satisfied is at the discretion of the 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 also collaborating with other dietetics educators across the board to share ideas and instill standard methods of executing this competency (Lordly, 2007).

Methods

Participants

The final sample consisted of a combination of DI directors, coordinators, and one RDN, with an emphasis on RDNs. 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 predominantly female. The sample included twelve DI directors, one assistant director, two DI coordinators, one didactic program in dietetics (DPD) director, and one recently certified 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 undergraduate level and two participants teaching on the graduate level. Eleven (68.8%) participants identified as a dietetics professor, eleven (68.8%) described advocacy and public policy as RDNs’ professional responsibility, and 7 (43.8%) reported comprehension deficiencies as a recursive issue. The first interview question asked, “What is your perception of the importance of educating interns regarding policy advocacy and public policy as it relates to the profession of dietetics?” Three 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, else (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 educators deemed advocacy and public policy in the curriculum of their program was important. How do you think this may be?” Two themes emerged: Twelve (75.0%) participants supported prospective and current RDNs struggle with comprehending advocacy and public policy, resulting in low engagement, while 5 (31.3%) reported email backlog as a contributing factor in interest. The third question resulted in low engagement, while 5 (31.3%) reported email backlog as a contributing factor in interest. 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?” Eight (50.0%) participants stated they have not participated in a public policy workshop followed by a written assignment and 7 (43.8%) instruct interns to contact local legislators regarding any policy-related issues. The final question was, “How can dietetics programs like Fraud! 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. Seven (43.8%) dietetic educators assign projects on current policy-related issues. Five (31.3%) stated that RDNs should understand the relevance and importance of advocacy and public policy engagement to students. Finally, 5 (31.3%) recommended the Academy’s Policy and Advocacy Rotation.

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.

Discussion

Just as the research articulated, the results of the study confirmed high variability among DI program directors’ method of choosing in depth meeting and policy competency. Selected methods aligned with recent research that concluded dietetic educators should implement a more robust advocacy and public policy component and collaborate with other dietetics educators to share ideas and instill standard methods of executing this competency (Lordly, 2007). This study supports the notion that future-year dietetics students’ readiness to practice should be addressed to produce professionally mature RDNs (Fing et al., 2018). While dietetic educators deemed advocacy and public policy a professional responsibility, participants also described comprehensive issues as a longstanding problem (Sidle, 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. For all participants, discussions among DI directors during the annual NDEP meeting were conducted on hands-on policy-related issues, such as offering the Academy’s Nutrition and Dietetics Policy and Advocacy Rotation. This would improve the ratio of undergraduate students receiving an immersion of previously acquired knowledge. Therefore, implementation of standardized guidelines for DIs would bridge the gap between advocacy and public policy and prospective RDN stakeholders.

Conclusions

In order to increase collaboration, improve method of delivery, and manifest perceived value in advocacy and public policy education in DIs, modifications 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 have potential to be transferable 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)

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