

# Dietetics Student Focus Groups Reveal Value of School Nutrition Sites for Supervised Practice Experiences



Jessica F. Keller, Virginia S. Webb, MS, RD  
and Deborah D. Carter, PhD, RD, LD  
Kansas State University

Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD  
National Food Service Management Institute  
Applied Research Division  
The University of Southern Mississippi

## OBJECTIVES

- To identify participants' knowledge of school nutrition as a career
- Ascertain perceived value of various school nutrition learning experiences
- Solicit advantages and disadvantages of school nutrition setting as a training site

## METHODOLOGY

- Focus group methodology was used to explore the use of school nutrition sites in dietetics education.
- Dietetics students and interns were recruited to participate in one of two 60-minute focus groups at the 2010 annual meeting of the American Dietetic Association.
- Directors of supervised practice programs in dietetics assisted the researchers in identifying students attending the conference.
- Sixteen students volunteered, representing all USDA regions and dietetics program types.
- Focus group discussions were audio-taped and common themes which emerged were summarized.

## SELECTED FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- Do the words "school lunch," "school foodservice," or "school nutrition" leave you with a positive or negative impression?
- Do you know any Registered Dietitians (RDs) who work in school nutrition programs?
- What have you learned about school nutrition during your dietetics education?
- What would be the positive aspects of completing supervised practice experiences in a school nutrition program?
- What might be the negative aspects of completing supervised practice experiences in a school nutrition program?
- What are some kinds of school nutrition-related experiences in which you would like to participate?

## RESULTS

- Experiences in a school nutrition setting altered negative perceptions about school nutrition, and enabled dietetic students/interns to recognize the valuable role school nutrition plays in the lives of children.
- Prior to a school nutrition rotation, none of the participants knew an RD who worked in a school nutrition program.
- Participants reported a wide range of exposure to school nutrition during their dietetics education including guest speakers, coverage of school nutrition-related topics in various classes, and field trips to school sites.
- Some participants were exposed to school rotations as part of their supervised practice experiences while others had no exposure to school nutrition.
- During the hands-on experiences, dietetic students/interns recognized the complexity of the school nutrition environment and gained new respect for school nutrition employees.

- Positive aspects of participating in school nutrition supervised practice included:
  - learning about the federally funded program and how it operates,
  - working with children and sharing knowledge about good nutrition,
  - seeing the impact the program has on the lives of children, and
  - the opportunity to combine foodservice management, community nutrition, and clinical nutrition in one supervised practice experience.
- Negative aspects of supervised practice in school nutrition setting included:
  - lack of school sites willing to take students,
  - lack of trained preceptors who understand the goals and rationale for having dietetics students/interns in schools, and
  - complexity of integrating community nutrition and clinical nutrition (i.e., children with special needs, food allergies, etc.) experiences along with the usual foodservice management emphasis.
- Additional experiences desired by dietetic students/interns:
  - opportunity to work with and understand the meal reimbursement paperwork,
  - seeing how directors create and manage a realistic budget, and
  - development of business plans; grant-writing opportunities.

## APPLICATION

Resources are needed to assist dietetics education and school nutrition directors to develop and facilitate rich supervised practice rotations. Positive experiences for dietetics students and interns may entice more dietitians to consider school nutrition as a viable and exciting career choice.

## COMMON THEMES REVEALED DURING THE FOCUS GROUPS

- Dietetic students/interns had a positive view of school nutrition after their supervised practice experience. Many students/interns had no exposure to school nutrition until a supervised practice experience.
- School nutrition is a viable career option for RDs.
- Feeding children who may not otherwise receive meals is vitally important to their health and well-being.
- School meals can be cost-effective, nutritious and can play an educational role in preventing childhood obesity.
- School nutrition is a more challenging job than it may appear to the casual observer.
- School nutrition is often discussed in various college courses.
- Guest speakers are frequently used to introduce school nutrition.
- Volunteer activities can provide dietetic students/interns a way to learn about school nutrition. Communication between school nutrition programs and dietetic education can lead to win-win opportunities.