

Fall 2020

## Creating Engaged Community Scholarship through Alternate Experiential Learning in Dietetics Education

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### Recommended Citation

Combs, Elizabeth Lucas and Schwartz, Aaron Kyle (2020) "Creating Engaged Community Scholarship through Alternate Experiential Learning in Dietetics Education," *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol3/iss1/10>

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# Creating Engaged Community Scholarship through Alternate Experiential Learning in Dietetics Education

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## Introduction

Supervised Practice Programs (SPPs) are designed to provide innovative experiential learning opportunities for dietetic interns. The University of Kentucky Dietetics and Human Nutrition (UK DHN) program promotes critical thinking and integrates the hard skills learned in the classroom with soft skills required in a professional setting. The experience provides an opportunity for hands-on learning and application, creativity, and reflection linking theory to practice. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the 2019 SPP, challenging the fundamental nature of experiential learning. Problem-solving and flexibility were required to develop innovative approaches to helping interns meet core competency expectations through alternative supervised learning experiences. The lessons learned will inform future program activities that benefit from offering remote internship experiences.

## Program Description Prior to COVID-19

UK DHN SPP is an accredited program designed to advance educational development beyond the undergraduate level, preparing students for entry into the dietetics profession. Learning is enhanced by providing interns with structured opportunities to apply knowledge in a professional setting. UK DHN SPP prepares interns to become professionally competent in food and nutrition systems and learn how these systems interact to support communities' and individuals' well-being. Core competencies necessary to practice as entry-level dietitians are met during this program. These competencies are set forth by the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND). Upon completion of the program, interns are eligible to sit for the Commission of Dietetics Registration (CDR) Exam to become credentialed Registered Dietitians.

**“The lessons learned will inform future program activities that benefit from offering remote internship experiences.”**

The UK DHN SPP annual cycle begins in January and concludes in August, providing twenty interns with a minimum of 1,200 supervised practice hours. Within this timeframe, facilities across the state of Kentucky provide interns with hands-on experiences in Food Service Systems Management, Community Nutrition, and Medical Nutrition Therapy. Interns complete assignments designed to supplement the practical experiences that occur on-site. Some examples include assessing an advanced clinical case study, conducting a plate waste study, creating a research project, planning and implementing a theme meal, and creating and distributing nutrition education in a community.

The program provides a learning environment that encourages students to use problem-solving skills, build self-confidence and seek new learning opportunities. The experiences foster individual independence, critical thinking, initiative, creativity, maturity, and self-reliance for successful entry into the profession.

### **Changes Made Due to COVID-19**

In response to COVID-19, ACEND reduced the total number of experiential hours from 1,200 to 1,000 of which 400 hours could be completed through alternate, remote learning experiences. UK DHN SPP transitioned to remote learning in March 2020 with all interns departing their sites. To maintain the timeline to graduation, UK DHN SPP was able to quickly expand the breadth of its online experiences by leveraging both internal and external collaborators. Each original assignment intended to be completed on-site was quickly altered to allow for remote completion. For exam-

ple, a plate waste study to be completed on site was adapted to a self-assessment of food waste during the stay-at-home order along with a literature review on plate waste research and sustainability. The Nutrition Care Professionals<sup>1</sup> waived fees for a series of complex, interactive clinical case studies for internship programs to use during the pandemic and these activities were assigned on a weekly basis. Additionally, a broad scope of professional speakers were invited to present nutrition-related topics to interns remotely on a weekly basis.

A series of additional opportunities were created through collaboration to create impactful experiences both for the interns as well as the community. A DHN Assistant Professor, connected UK DHN SPP with Community Agricultural Nutrition Enterprises (CANE) in Whitesburg, KY, for a unique remote experience. CANE worked with interns to develop budgeted weekly meal plans and educational resources on food preparation. These resources were then included in meal kits distributed to families with school-aged children who lost two meals each day as a result of COVID-19. This project allowed students to strategically apply principles of management in a service-learning framework. UK DHN SPP collaborated with two UK DHN extension faculty for interns to create virtual extension program packages to educate and motivate Kentuckians to mindfully choose health promoting behaviors to prevent or manage chronic diseases. Interns created an information release, recorded a podcast, and created a virtual online program including a facilitator's guide. Using popular virtual platforms, students were able to design, implement, and evaluate presentations

to a target audience. Additionally, the DHN department chair spearheaded a collaboration for interns to learn about a social marketing project, Cook Together, Eat Together (CTET) and to apply that knowledge to create resources for Family & Consumer Science (FCS) Extension Agents. This engaged scholarship opportunity allowed interns to support FCS Agents with the creation of virtual nutrition education resources including podcasts, Facebook Live Events, and other platforms. The capstone project for this collaboration was to create and produce a high-quality recipe demonstration video and other resources to be presented through social media.

### **Challenges Faced or Problem-solving Techniques Employed**

While the UK DHN SPP students have been moving forward with their goal of graduating on time by diligently completing remote work, there have been several challenges identified. Perhaps the most significant barrier was the interns' desire to participate and contribute to community organizations. When the transition to remote learning initially occurred, interns were completing assignments with simulated experiences. While these mock activities were helping them meet required competencies, they lacked the personal connection to meaningful work. Dietetics students have chosen a career path toward a helping profession and have a strong desire to produce work that directly impacts others. As students' motivation to complete the mock assignments waned, the

program promptly began developing collaborative projects to provide interns with opportunities that connected them with community organizations. The three projects described above, CANE Kitchen, extension program packages, and Cook Together, Eat Together, provided the interns with the opportunity to not only meet competencies, but to also produce meaningful work that had a direct impact on community members.

The second main challenge encountered was the amount of work completed in isolation on a computer. Interns struggled to manage the workload of virtual assignments given the monotonous nature of long hours of sedentary work. To reduce the burden of isolation, course instructors planned regular interactive meetings to maintain connections to the outside world. During these meetings, the interns were able to brainstorm, share thoughts, and hear from others. They were also able to hear from professional guests at each meeting. This helped strengthen the connection

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of what they were doing virtually with the working world. Interns were able to gain an appreciation for the skillsets they were developing during this unique experiential learning situation. Additionally, several assignments included group work where students contributed individually and collaborated with small groups of three or four. These groups changed weekly to ensure that students were engaging with the maximum number of classmates possible. The necessity for social interaction was critical in maintaining intern morale, productivity, and

accountability. Finally, professional specialists were brought in to facilitate several of the projects for the interns. This allowed the interns to receive real-time feedback from professionals in the field, which provided some sense of normalcy to the interns and provided additional motivation to create the best work possible. These small changes provided the interns with the chance to demonstrate active participation, teamwork, and contributions in group settings.

## Looking Ahead

Many campuses are reviewing their re-start efforts for the fall and the University of Kentucky is carefully examining different scenarios for the upcoming semester. While a final plan is not currently in place, it is important to plan for the possibility that some or all experiences will need to be delivered remotely. Lessons learned from this past year's rapid transition to remote experiential learning will be applied in the future if students need to gain alternate practice again.

The first lesson learned includes partnering with outside organizations to create experiential work that will be shared with external stakeholders. This not only provides interns with the motivation to create professional products since their work will have a direct impact on others, but also applies their knowledge in a professional setting. The second lesson learned was the value of inviting resident specialists to collaborate and engage with the interns on a regular basis. Interns appreciated hearing from professionals in the field and these interactions kept students accountable to maintain professionalism and produce high quality work. It also provided students with the profession-

al exchanges they were missing from their traditional internship experiences.

## Conclusion

Transitioning an experiential learning program to remote delivery introduced challenges, but it also provided a chance to employ critical thinking skills and demonstrate innovative approaches. Moreover, it was a chance to model these professional characteristics that the supervised practice strives to cultivate in its dietetic interns. The supervised practice program is a critical piece of dietetics education in order to develop ability, confidence, knowledge, skills, and competence to practice as a registered dietitian. The current class of interns that has endured the unexpected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had the chance to develop these traits through novel approaches employed to ensure their successful graduation and subsequent transition to the working world. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nutritioncarepro.com/>

## References

Nutrition Care Professionals. (n.d.). Welcome to NCPRO. <https://www.nutritioncarepro.com/>.