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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to describe the career motivations and aspirations of dietetic students using the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The objectives were to identify and quantify 1) the factors that motivate current students to choose dietetics as a career, 2) the future career aspirations of dietetic students, and 3) the way in which dietetic students make career decisions. **Methods:** This descriptive study utilized the validated Career Aspirations and Motivations of Dietetics Students (CAMDS) survey. Program directors of the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND)-accredited programs shared the CAMDS survey with their students electronically. A resulting convenience sample of n=328 students were enrolled in a didactic program in dietetics, dietetic internship, coordinated program in dietetics, or future education model graduate program. Data was captured regarding demographics, path towards a career in dietetics, motivations and influences to practice as a dietetics professional, and future career aspirations. Descriptive statistics were used to convey study findings. Data were both nominal and ordinal. **Results:** The majority of participants were female, white, and born after 1980. Motivating factors to pursue dietetics included cooking with family during childhood; a personal interest in nutrition; the influence of a parent or legal guardian; social media; and the opportunity to help others. The preferred employment sectors were clinical dietetics, community dietetics, and private practice. **Conclusions:** Attention to the career motivations and aspirations of dietetic students is requisite to supporting the growing demand for credentialed dietetics practitioners. The vast majority of current dietetic students are classified as millennials or generation Z; these students have career motivations and aspirations that are distinct from previous generations of dietetic students.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to describe the career motivations and aspirations of dietetic students using the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The objectives were to identify and quantify 1) the factors that motivate current students to choose dietetics as a career, 2) the future career aspirations of dietetic students, and 3) the way in which dietetic students make career decisions. **Methods:** This descriptive study utilized the validated Career Aspirations and Motivations of Dietetics Students (CAMDS) survey. Program directors of the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND)-accredited programs shared the CAMDS survey with their students electronically. A resulting convenience sample of n=328 students were enrolled in a didactic program in dietetics, dietetic internship, coordinated program in dietetics, or future education model graduate program. Data was captured regarding demographics, path towards a career in dietetics, motivations and influences to practice as a dietetics professional, and future career aspirations. Descriptive statistics were used to convey study findings. Data were both nominal and ordinal. **Results:** The majority of participants were female, white, and born after 1980. Motivating factors to pursue dietetics included cooking with family during childhood; a personal interest in nutrition; the influence of a parent or legal guardian; social media; and the opportunity to help others. The preferred employment sectors were clinical dietetics, community dietetics, and private practice. **Conclusions:** Attention to the career motivations and aspirations of dietetic students is requisite to supporting the growing demand for credentialed dietetics practitioners. The vast majority of current dietetic students are classified as millennials or generation Z; these students have career motivations and aspirations that are distinct from previous generations of dietetic students.

Keywords: career motivations, career aspirations, dietetic students, social cognitive career theory

INTRODUCTION

The *Dietetics Supply and Demand: 2010-2020* report predicted a workforce shortage of credentialed dietetics practitioners in that 75% of the growing demand would be met by the projected supply.[1] The workforce of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) is dependent in part on the progression of dietetic students through accredited academic programs, most of whom are classified as millennials (born 1981-1996) or generation Z (born 1997 or later).[2] What motivates students to choose dietetics as a career, which factors most influence their decisions, and their future career aims can inform the academic practices of recruitment and retention. Successful matriculation of dietetic students through the educational milestones of a bachelor's degree, dietetic internship, and forthcoming master's degree is requisite for supporting the growing demand for credentialed dietetics practitioners.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

The social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is a relatively new explanation of student interests, decision making processes, and levels of success.[3] Rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory, the SCCT encompasses both cognitive and physical variables and is a valuable tool in framing student motivations.[4] The SCCT integrates cognitive variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals with other aspects of one's self such as gender, ethnicity, social network, and barriers.[5-6] This theory has been applied to the field of dietetics or closely related disciplines in previous studies.[7-9]

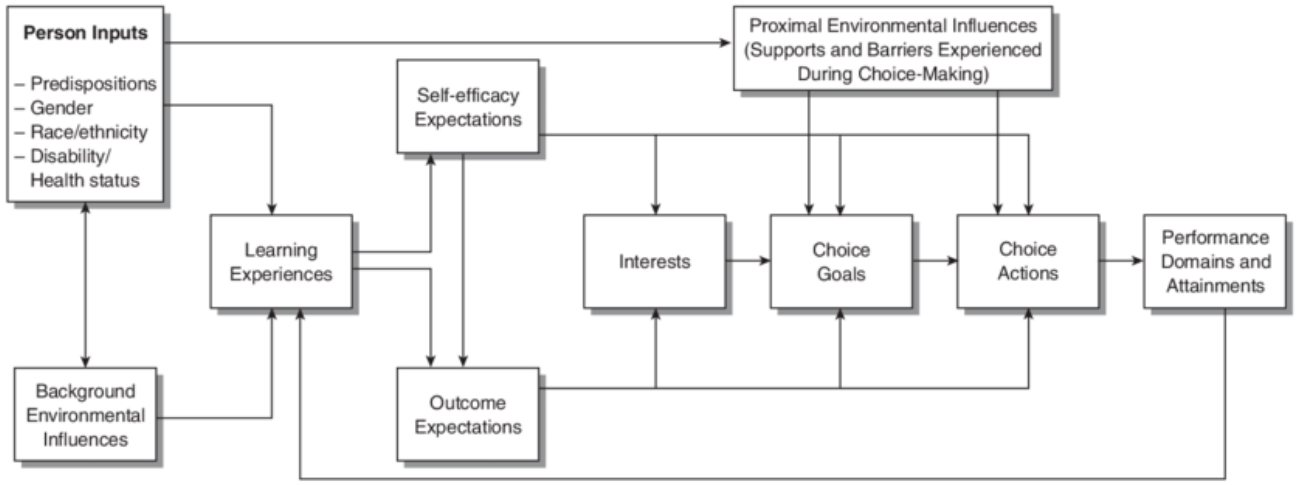

Figure 1. The Social Cognitive Career Theory. Adapted from Lent RW, Brown DS., and Hackett G. (1994). "Toward a unifying Social Cognitive Theory of Career and Academic Interest, Choice, and Performance." [Monograph] Journal of Vocational Behavior 45:79:122

Motivating Factors to Choose Dietetics

Existing studies on the motivating factors to choose dietetics as a career have spanned both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, have targeted participants in multiple countries including the United States, Canada, and Australia, and have included undergraduate students, dietetic interns, and new dietetic practitioners. The motivating factors that consistently emerged were a personal interest in nutrition, a desire to enjoy one's career, and the aim of helping others. Factors of lesser importance were a long-term interest in the discipline of dietetics, high pay, and social prestige. Past experiences also influenced an interest dietetics, including experience with a diet-related disease, weight gain or loss, participation in a sport, or a food-related work experience.[7,10-17]

Aspirations of Dietetic Students

Relatedly, existing studies have examined the career aspirations of dietetic students. Markley and Huyck identified the specific areas of interest among dietetic students in rank order as health, disease, and healthcare; teaching and health promotion; sports and fitness; private practice counseling; counseling and behavior change; food and cooking.[14] Linsenmeyer and Rahman reported that most dietetic students anticipate holding multiple jobs throughout the span of their careers, and that the majority anticipate pursuing a position in clinical dietetics as their first job.[17]

Problem Statement

The existing research is either primarily qualitative in nature or was published nearly two decades ago, and therefore may not reflect the characteristics of current dietetic students, most of whom are classified as "millennials" or "generation Z". Quantitative

research on the career aspirations and motivations of current dietetic students is needed in order to better understand the present student generation.

Statement of Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe the career motivations and aspirations of dietetic students using the SCCT. The objectives were to identify and quantify 1) the factors that motivate dietetic students to choose dietetics as a career, 2) the future career aspirations of dietetic students, and 3) the way in which dietetic students make career decisions.

METHODS

Study Design and Participants

This descriptive study was conducted between March and April of 2018 with a convenience sample of students enrolled in Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND)-accredited education programs. Eligible participants were 18 years of age or older at the time of data collection and enrolled in a didactic program in dietetics, dietetic internship, coordinated program in dietetics, or future education model graduate program. Participants were recruited via email by program directors that agreed to share the study information with their students. Voluntary completion of the online survey served as implied consent. A random drawing of one $50 gift card was used to incentivize participation. The Saint Louis University Institutional Review Board provided an expedited review and approved this study.

CAMDS Instrument

A total of n=328 students completed the Career Aspirations and Motivations of Dietetics Students (CAMDS) instrument online via Qualtrics. Responses were anonymous and did not include any personal identifiable information. CAMDS is intended for use by didactic programs in dietetics, dietetic internships, coordinated programs in dietetics, future education model graduate programs, and nutrition and dietetic technician programs accredited by ACEND. It is designed to capture demographic information, path towards a career in dietetics, motivations and influences to practice as a dietetics professional, and future career aspirations of dietetic students. Content validity of the CAMDS instrument was determined using content validity index methodology. The CAMDS instrument included 71 items across nine content domains: life stage where career interest was piqued; path to a career in nutrition and dietetics; past experiences; interests and abilities; influential people; influential forms of media or recruitment tools; attractive traits of the profession; desired area of practice; and approach toward first job. The item-level CVI was 0.84-1.0 and the scale-level CVI was 0.92.[18]

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to convey the study findings. Demographic data were both nominal and ordinal; data on career aspirations and motivations was strictly nominal. Where participants could select a fixed number of items (i.e. “Rank the top three characteristics of the dietetics profession that positively influenced your choice to pursue nutrition and dietetics as a career”), the reported figure reflects the percentage of respondents who selected an item as within their top three options. Where participants could select an unlimited number of options (i.e. “Which of the following people positively influenced your decision to pursue nutrition and dietetics as a career?”), the reported figures reflect the percentage of respondents who selected a given item, but with no ranking of importance.

RESULTS

The study sample (n=328) was primarily female (93.6%), white (83.7%), and born after 1980 (97.6%). Thus, the vast majority of participants were classified as millennials or generation Z. This sample is fairly consistent with the gender and ethnicity demographics of practicing RDNs reported by the Commission on Dietetic Registration.[19] Regarding program level, 31.0% were enrolled in an undergraduate program in nutrition and dietetics, 1.9% were enrolled in a graduate program in nutrition and dietetics, 25.7% were enrolled in a standalone dietetic internship, and 41.4% were enrolled in a combined graduate degree and dietetic internship program. The sample demographics for gender, ethnicity, birth year, and program level are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data for Students that Completed the CAMDS Survey (n = 328).

	Percentage
Gender	
Female	93.6%
Male	6.1%
Transgender	0.0%
Gender-nonconforming	0.3%
Age/birth year	
After 1980	97.6%

1965-1980	1.8%
Between 1946 and 1964	0.6%
Before 1964	0.0%
Race	
White	83.7%
Black or African American	0.9%
Asian	5.9%
Hispanic or Latino	1.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.6%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0%
Multiracial	3.4%
Other	4.3%
Program level	
Undergraduate program in nutrition and dietetics	31.0%
Graduate program in nutrition and dietetics (no dietetic internship)	1.9%
Dietetic internship (no graduate program)	25.7%
Combined graduate degree and dietetic internship program	41.4%

Path to Dietetics

Regarding the path to pursuing a career in dietetics, the majority of participants became interested in the profession during college (41.3%) or high school (34.3%). The remainder became interested in dietetics after college (9.6%), after high school but before college (6.2%), or during middle school (4%). Relatedly, participants reported switching to dietetics from a different major during college (34.6%), seeking out dietetics in high school (34.0%), returning to college to pursue a second career (12.9%), or transferring from a different college or university (9.4%).

Motivating Factors to Pursue Dietetics

Motivating factors to pursue dietetics as a profession included various past experiences, interests or abilities, influential persons, media or recruitment tools, and characteristics of the dietetics profession. See Table 2 for a full list of the motivating factors to pursue dietetics.

The past experiences that most influenced participants were cooking with family during childhood (58.8%), participation in a sport (42.1%), experience with a diet-related disease or condition (43.1%), and experience with weight loss or gain (40.6%). Others included a food-related work experience (37.4%), gardening or farming during childhood (21.7%), a nutrition course in high school (20.4%), a guest speaker or lecturer (19.8%), and an on-campus college tour (4.7%).

The vast majority of participants (91.3%) reported that a personal interest in nutrition positively influenced their decision to pursue dietetics. Additional interests or abilities that were highly endorsed were the relationship of nutrition to health (87.3%), the potential to make a difference (83.9%), health, disease, and healthcare (71.4%) and food and cooking (71.4%). Other interests or abilities were the desire for food and nutrition skills (59.9%) science (55.6%), sports and fitness (49.4%), and counseling and behavioral change (47.2%).

The people that positively influenced participants' decision to pursue dietetics were a parent or legal guardian (61.1%), a registered dietitian (46.3%), and a college professor (52.4%). Other influential people were a healthcare professional other than a registered dietitian (22.2%), a college academic advisor (18.0%), and a high school teacher (10.3%). The media platforms that influenced the most participants were social media (47.7%) and cooking shows on TV (28.8%). Other influential media were a newspaper or magazine article (24.6%) and podcasts (12.7%); influential recruitment tools were a career day or fair (15.8%), a pamphlet or flyer (8.1%), a recruitment event (4.6%) and direct mail (0.8%).

Lastly, vast majority of participants (80.3%) identified the opportunity to help others as a characteristic of the dietetics profession that positively influenced their career choice. Other characteristics were the expert knowledge in food and nutrition (61.0%), and personal or professional fulfillment (49.8%).

Table 2. Motivating Factors to Pursue a Career in Dietetics (n =328).

	Percentage
Past experiences	
Cooking with family during childhood	58.8%
Experience with a diet-related disease or condition	43.1%
Participation in a sport	42.1%
Experience with weight loss or gain	40.6%
Food-related work experience	37.4%
Gardening or farming during childhood	21.7%
Nutrition course in high school	20.4%
Guest speaker or lecturer	19.8%
On-campus college tour	4.7%
Interests or abilities	
Personal interest	91.3%
Relationship of nutrition to health	87.3%
Potential to make a difference	83.9%
Food and cooking	71.4%
Health, disease, and health care	71.4%
Desire for food and nutrition skills	59.9%
Science	55.6%
Sports and fitness	49.4%
Counseling and behavioral change	47.2%
Research	37.2%
Cultural foods and practices	33.5%
Agriculture and food production	19.6%
Food service management	15.5%
Influential people	
Parent or legal guardian	61.1%
College professor	52.4%
Registered dietitian	46.3%
Health care professional other than an RD	22.2%
College academic advisor	18.0%
High school teacher	10.3%
Employer	9.3%
Career services at college	3.9%
High school guidance counselor	3.9%
Media or recruitment tools	
Social media	47.7%
Cooking shows on TV	28.8%
Newspaper or magazine article	24.6%
Career day or fair	15.8%
Podcasts	12.7%
Pamphlet or flyer	8.1%
Recruitment event	4.6%

Career Aspirations in Dietetics

Participants were asked to rank their top two preferred sectors of employment in dietetics (Table 3). In rank order, the most frequently endorsed sectors were clinical dietetics (60.7%), community dietetics (42.2%), private practice (30.4%), education and research (26.1%), food and nutrition management (19.2%), and entrepreneurship (15.6%).

Regarding career course, participants were asked to identify a statement that best described their outlook towards their first job as credentialed nutrition and dietetics professional. The majority (69%) reported they would seek a job in their preferred dietetics employment setting but would be open to opportunities in other sectors of dietetics. Others reported they would be open to any dietetics employment setting as their first job (20%). Smaller factions reported they would only accept a job in their preferred

dietetics employment setting (6%), openness to any employment setting as their first job, whether or not it is dietetics-related (2%), or an intention to start their own business (2%).

Table 3. Preferred Sectors of Employment in Dietetics.

	Percentage		
	1st Choice	2nd Choice	Total
Clinical dietetics	41.9%	18.8%	60.7%
Community dietetics	21.4%	20.8%	42.2%
Private practice	12.8%	17.6%	30.4%
Education and research	7.3%	18.8%	26.1%
Food & nutrition management	7.7%	11.5%	19.2%
Entrepreneurship	7.3%	8.3%	15.6%
Culinary arts	1.6%	4.2%	5.8%

DISCUSSION

Comparison to Literature: Life Stages

Regarding life stages, most participants reported committing to dietetics during high school (34.0%) or during college by switching majors (34.6%). This marks a slight shift from Kobel's 1997 study of dietetic students where 19.8% committed during high school and 54.5% did so during college, suggesting moderate progress over the past two decades in that more students are discovering dietetics as a career path at an earlier life stage.[13] In addition, 12.9% of participants in this study and 10% of Kobel's participants reported returning to college to pursue a second career, suggesting that nontraditional students continue to make up a sizeable percentage of students in accredited dietetics programs.[13]

Comparison to Literature: Career Motivations

The motivating factors to pursue dietetics have remained mostly consistent with two notable deviations. Past experiences such as personal weight loss or gain, a diet-related disease, and participation in a sport continue to be influential. A personal interest in nutrition, the desire to help others, and the aim of enjoying one's career were still highly endorsed. Various persons within one's social network continued to be recognized as influential.[10-17]

The influence of cooking during childhood was reported for the first time by Brady, Mahe, MacLellan, and Gingras in 2012.[10] In this current study, cooking with family during childhood was the single most endorsed past experience (58.8%). This suggests a dramatic shift over the past three decades in that cooking during childhood has jumped from a nonexistent factor to highly influential on students' decision to pursue dietetics.

Relatedly, the two most commonly endorsed media or recruitment tools were social media (47.7%) and cooking shows on TV (28.8%). Though the nature of social media's influence is unknown, it is plausible that the content was related to cooking and nutrition given the proliferation of food-related content on social media platforms.[20] Thus, it appears that a marked shift has emerged as the current generation is making a strong connection between food and cooking and the dietetics profession, and that this is a highly influential draw to dietetics as a career.

The second deviation from existing research was related to the influence of certain individuals over career choice. The most commonly endorsed influencers in this study were parents or legal guardians (61.1%), college professors (52.4%), registered dietitians (46.3%), and other healthcare professionals (22.2%). In past studies, family members and teachers had limited influence on career choice.[13] The findings of this study suggest that parents now demonstrate a strong influence over incoming students. The influence of college professors is consistent with the finding that a large number of students discover dietetics during college by switching majors. Lastly, both registered dietitians and other healthcare professionals continue to positively influence students' career choice in increasing numbers.[21]

Comparison to Literature: Career Aspirations

The SCCT upholds that career goals are inherently linked to the decision-making process of committing to a career.[3,5-6] Existing research of millennial and generation Z dietetic students has indicated that the vast majority anticipate holding multiple jobs throughout their careers, and that the majority intend to pursue a job in clinical dietetics as their first employment setting. The findings of this study were consistent with past research in that the most desirable employment sectors in rank order were clinical dietetics, community dietetics, private practice, and education or research.[17]

This study was the first to include questions regarding dietetic students' approach towards their first jobs. Only 6% of participants indicated they would only accept a job in their preferred employment setting, while 69% indicated they would seek their preferred setting but be open to other opportunities. This is consistent with past research on millennial and generation Z dietetic students where flexibility was the most attractive trait of the profession.[17] Thus, it appears that most dietetic students feel qualified and can envision themselves as happily employed in multiple employment sectors.

Practical Applications: Recruitment and Retention of Dietetic Students

Successful matriculation of dietetic students through accredited academic programs and internships is requisite for supporting the growing demand for credentialed dietetics practitioners. The findings of this study may support the pipeline of students to practitioners by informing recruitment and retention practices at academic institutions.

The CAMDS survey directly asked what media and recruitment tools were most influential on career choice. Although academic institutions may rely on traditional recruitment methods of flyers, recruitment events, and direct mailings, these were in fact the least influential on students. Instead, social media and cooking shows on TV were endorsed as the most influential. This finding is consistent with generalizations of millennials and generation Z as technology and social media savvy.[22-23] If relying on traditional recruitment methods, academic institutions may consider redirecting resources towards more influential platforms.

Beyond actual recruitment tools, the SCCT upholds the influence of cognitive and physical variables on an individual's career choice, many of which are beyond the influence of academic institutions.[6] In this study, the personal input of one's health status was a motivating factor for many participants in that 43.1% reported an experience with a diet-related disease or condition and 40.6% reported an experience with weight loss or gain positively influenced their career choice. Background and learning experiences also appeared influential in that cooking with family during childhood, participation in a sport, and gardening or farming during childhood were influential to 58.8%, 42.1%, and 21.7% of participants, respectively. The SCCT identifies personal interests as a categorically distinct variable. This appeared to be overwhelmingly true for the participants in this study in that 91.3% reported that a personal interest in nutrition positively influenced their career decision. Lastly, the finding that 83.9% of participants were motivated by the potential to make a difference with their profession is consistent with the SCCT variable of self-efficacy expectations.

While these cognitive and physical variables may be beyond the influence of academic institutions, they may still be used to form a psychographic understanding of millennial and generation Z dietetic students. For example, if activities such as cooking, gardening, or playing a sport were influential to many students, recruitment efforts may bridge the thinking between activities one enjoys and a potential career path. Or, if a personal interest in nutrition and the desire to help others were endorsed as highly influential, recruitment efforts may connect these interests to the dietetics profession.

Study Limitations

A limitation of the study was the inclusion of students across multiple levels of dietetics education, especially regarding career aspirations. For example, a freshman's career aspirations may be significantly different than those of a dietetic intern given the differences in academic and applied experiences. A second limitation was the strictly quantitative nature of the study design, which may not capture the complexity or nuances of a student's career aspirations and motivations. For example, although the study findings indicate that 47.7% of participants were positively influenced by social media, many aspects remain unknown, such as which social media platforms were most influential, the person or organization creating the content, and the nature of the content itself. A third limitation was the lack of age delineation between those classified as millennials versus generation Z.

Future Research

Future research may address the limitations of this study by examining the career motivations and aspirations of students at different levels of dietetics education and training and may compare the characteristics of various generations. In addition, qualitative methods via an explanatory approach may be applied to gain a richer understanding participant responses.[24] Lastly, further studies are needed to follow the course of young dietetic professionals as they advance through early, mid- and late-career stage.

CONCLUSIONS

Attention to the career motivations and aspirations of dietetic students is requisite to supporting the growing demand for credentialed dietetics practitioners. The findings of this study introduce new factors that are influencing students to choose dietetics as a career, including cooking with family during childhood, social media, cooking shows on TV, and a parent or legal guardian. Academic programs may utilize these attributes to inform recruitment and retention practices at academic institutions, and to better understand the psychographic characteristics of the current student population.

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