

Topic Area: Professional Development

Abstract Title: An Exploration of Dietetic Students' Perceptions of Their Involvement in a Non-Course-based Service Learning Opportunity
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Introduction: Service learning (SL) provides an opportunity to benefit both the community and undergraduate students. Common benefits reported by students involved in course-based SL include both skill and personal development; however, it is unknown whether the same benefits can be achieved in a non-course-based SL program within an academic setting.

Objectives: To explore undergraduate dietetic students' perceptions on their involvement in Nutrition Ignition! (NI!), an extra-curricular research club that supports a community-based research program for school-aged children and their families. Student NI! members run the program by getting involved in various activities. NI! aims to improve children's knowledge and awareness of nutrition and healthy living.

Methods: A brief demographic study questionnaire and focus group interviews (20-45 min duration) were conducted on a convenience sample of NI! members in March 2016 (n=33). Members were eligible to participate if they had contributed at least 10 hours of volunteer time to the club; were over the age of 18 years; and, were enrolled in the Nutrition and Dietetics program at the university. Inductive content analysis was employed by the researchers on the data as per the immersion-crystallization method and major themes were identified.

Results: Participants reported getting involved in the NI! club to: improve professional skills; expand learning; help their community and expand social networks. Participants felt that their involvement with NI! improved their communication skills, provided a better understanding of "real world" community-based program implementation and research, broadened their world view, and enhanced preparation for their internship applications and careers as dietitians.

Conclusions: A non-course-based SL program offered in an academic setting provides similar benefits to dietetic students as those observed with course-based opportunities and should be considered an effective way by which students can get meaningful experiences to deepen the breadth and depth of their understanding of the dietetic profession.