

Abstract

Admission criteria and selection processes of Canadian dietetic programs: for a diversified profession

Context: In Canada, the underrepresentation of diverse social identities in the dietetics profession is a pressing issue. To address this disparity, it is crucial to examine the admission processes in dietetic programs across the country. These processes are significant gateways into the profession, with program directors and selection committees acting as key decision-makers who determine the criteria for admission. The lack of transparency surrounding admission procedures, coupled with variations in practices gleaned from limited U.S. data, raises substantial concerns regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Research objective and hypothesis: The objective is to determine current admission criteria and selection processes of dietetics programs in Canada. We hypothesize that there will be a variety of methods, that will combine subjective and objective criteria.

Methods: This is a national cross-sectional study using a bilingual electronic survey tailored to the five categories of dietetics programs in Canada: Undergraduate degree fully integrated with the practicum, Undergraduate degree partially integrated, Undergraduate degree not integrated, Post-degree Practicum, and Combined Masters Practicum program. The survey will include close-ended questions (e.g. selection criteria, selection committee, selection process) and open-ended questions (e.g. ideal dietetic candidate description, details on the training offered to the selection committee). Program directors from all 32 programs across the 22 Canadian institutions will be invited, with an expected response rate of 45%. Data will be analyzed quantitatively using SPSS and qualitatively through a thematic approach in QDAminer.

Value to dietetic practice: Identifying barriers to entry is essential to fulfill our social accountability to serve diverse populations. Understanding the current admission practices is the first step towards implementing changes that foster more diverse dietetics students' cohorts. This research has the potential to positively impact the retention of trainees with varied social identities in Canada.

Admission criteria and selection processes of Canadian dietetic programs: for a diversified and equitable profession

Rationale of importance:

The need for equity, diversity and inclusion in dietetics

Registered Dietitians (RDs) in Canada are discussing the lack of diversity within the profession. Evidence is sparse to date, but suggests that the demographic composition of the dietetic workforce does not reflect the diversity of the Canadian population we are serving, and mostly comprises White (1,2) female (3) dietitians. Little evidence exists to date on the identity of registered dietitians, in terms of Indigenous identity, social class, body size, sexual and gender identity, and other identities that will influence their career trajectory.

In terms of racial identities, evidence shows that competition for practicum positions is a key barrier to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals' entry to the dietetic profession (4). A recent survey of dietetic practicum applicants at the University of Manitoba reported that White students had 3.8x higher odds of securing a dietetic practicum position compared to racialized students (2). One of the main challenges faced by these racialized students was the stress associated with the application process (2). These findings suggest that dietetics education reflects the systems and norms that discourage the recruitment, retention, and overall well-being of BIPOC students in higher education as a whole (5,6).

In terms of marginalized identities, evidence suggests that representation from various groups such as the 2SLGBTQ+ community (7), people in larger bodies (8), men (9), and likely groups with various physical abilities, immigration experience or neurodiverse identities, to name a few, are under-represented in dietetics. The current societal binary and the heteronormative views of dietetics (10) exclude equity-seeking groups, and set the norm for dietetic professionalization (11). This lack of representation of social identities within the profession needs to be redressed to recruit and prepare RDs to safely and competently serve the diverse Canadian population.

Admission process as an opportunity to increase diversity

Our social accountability to serve diverse publics requires that barriers to entry to the profession be identified, and removed. One of the key steps to redress inequalities and improve diversity in the profession is at admission to the dietetic programs. In most provinces, a 4-year undergraduate degree, supervised unpaid dietetic practicum (integrated or not with the academic program), and a national exam to entry are required to obtain licensure to practice as a RD, demonstrating the many milestones required to enter the profession. Those with more privilege are more likely to be successful in this career track.

There are currently five types of programs in Canada: 1) Undergraduate degrees fully integrated with the practicum; 2) Undergraduate degrees partially integrated; 3) Undergraduate degree not integrated; 4) Post-degree Practicums; and 5) Combined Masters Practicum programs. The admission process and selection criteria for all these programs are not publicly available, and it is not possible to see how students are awarded opportunities to pursue a dietetic career.

Because there is limited number of positions available in these programs, the program directors and the selection committee act as gatekeepers to the profession (12), by determining the selection process, the application requirements and the admission criteria. A 2023 study

conducted among 89 directors of Dietetic Internships in the United States (US) revealed that practices are heterogeneous in the composition of the selection committees, the level of training for the selection by the committee members, the use of scoring systems, and the choice of subjective and objective selection criteria (13). This study also revealed practices that are questionable when pursuing equity, diversity and inclusion in dietetics (13). First, the absence of training prior to the selection process is worrisome, considering that awareness on unconscious bias may alleviate discriminatory practices (14). Some programs made selection criteria as well as the scoring system available only to applicants who requested it (13), suggesting that students who know how to navigate academia have an advantage over first-generation students. Finally, not all programs gave the same importance to the subjective selection criteria, such as volunteering experience, previous research experience and English as second language test scores, which are highly dependent on the level of privilege the candidate benefits from in their academic and personal life. These US results highlight barriers to entry to the profession, and it is crucial that we characterize the admission processes in Canadian programs to better understand how candidates are selected. To our knowledge, no study to date has comprehensively looked at the admission process and selection criteria, with an EDI lens, to determine how and who gets trained to become a registered dietitian in Canada.

Beyond dietetics, evidence from other health professions suggests that the admission process can impact the diversity of student cohorts, specifically when measures are taken to favor inclusion. Improvement in admission processes are considered in nursing (15), medicine (16) as well as physiotherapy programs (17). In medicine, altering the admission criteria has led to an increased diversity among the candidates who are selected for an admission interview and subsequently are admitted to the program (16). While insights can be gleaned from other healthcare fields, they are insufficient for guiding changes in dietetics, due to the distinctive nature of dietetic practice, characterized by dietitians' specialized roles in nutrition care and the unique significance of food in shaping social and cultural identities (18).

Hypothesis and objectives:

The objective of this research is to determine current admission criteria and selection processes of dietetics programs in Canada. We hypothesize that there will be a variety of methods, that will combine subjective and objective criteria.

Methodological approach:

Study design: This is a national cross-sectional study using an electronic survey with open- and close-ended items. **Measure:** We will develop a quantitative online survey in English and French, based on the survey developed by Card et al. 2023 (13), using LimeSurvey through the University of Montréal. The survey will comprise five question sets, and each set will be tailored to the 5 categories of dietetics programs in Canada: 1) Undergraduate degrees fully integrated with the practicum; 2) Undergraduate degrees partially integrated; 3) Undergraduate degree not integrated; 4) Post-degree Practicums; and 5) Combined Masters Practicum programs. The survey will comprise close-ended questions (e.g. selection criteria, selection committee, selection process, socio-demographic data of the respondent, etc) and open-ended questions (e.g. ideal dietetic candidate description, details on the training offered to the selection committee, perceived challenges of diversifying dietetics, role of program director in diversifying dietetics, changes made in the selection process in the past, etc). The survey will be piloted with the five study populations, inviting 5 dietetics education experts who will represent various

social/cultural identities and official language use. **Sample and recruitment:** The sample frame consists of the 5 types of programs: 1) 8 Undergraduate degrees fully integrated with the practicum; 2) 8 Undergraduate degrees partially integrated; 3) 4 Undergraduate degrees not integrated; 4) 7 Post-degree Practicums; and 5) 5 Combined Masters Practicum programs. These 32 programs are offered by 22 institutions across Canada, so directors at institutions offering multiple programs will only be asked to complete one survey, including the subsets of questions that relates to all the programs they are offering at their institution. Dietetic program directors will be identified from each program's website. The survey will be sent directly to them, inviting them to participate. Two email reminders will be sent. We anticipate a 45% response rate, based on Card et al. 2023 (13) which would represent 10 completed surveys. **Analysis:** Survey data will be cleaned and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive analysis (i.e. frequencies and means) will be calculated for the quantitative close-ended questions. For the open-ended question, a qualitative thematic approach (19) will be used to identify themes.

Importance to dietetic practice:

The proposed study directly aligns with CFDR "Accelerate Cultural Safety, Diversity, and Health Equity in Practice" research priority. Our study focuses on determining current admission criteria and selection processes of dietetics programs in Canada. A comprehensive understanding of the current practices is important to inform appropriate changes and to evaluate initiatives to ensure more diverse cohorts of dietetics students. Within and beyond the profession of dietetics, the results of this research may support and increase retention of BIPOC trainees, here in Canada, as well as in other countries. It might also impact the Canadian health care system, as it will ensure we recruit and graduate dietitians who embody various identities, which is crucial to patient safety and health equity.

Timeline (2 years): Year 1: finalizing protocol and obtaining ethics approval; developing the survey and obtain feedback from experts; recruitment and data collection. Year 2: Data analysis; manuscript writing and knowledge dissemination.

Budget projections: Total \$20 000

Item	Description	Year 1	Year 2
Salary: Research coordinator	A bilingual (French and English) registered dietitian to obtain ethics approval, support recruitment efforts, complete data collection and analysis (~10h/week, 32 week/yr, \$30/hr = \$9 450/yr)	\$9 450	\$9 450
Study costs: Participant incentives	All participants who complete the survey will be entered in a draw to win one of two gift cards of \$50	\$100	-
Knowledge dissemination: Conference travel	Dietitians of Canada conference, for one investigator. (Registration \$300, hotel \$500 and flight \$200) <i>Remaining cost to be covered by the principal applicant</i>	-	\$500
Knowledge dissemination: Cost of publishing	One peer-reviewed manuscript. Targeted journal: Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research. <i>Remaining cost to be covered by the principal applicant</i>	-	\$500

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Application for Dietetic Practice-Based Research Grant

(Duplicate pages 1 and 2 if additional space is needed)

Title of Project:	Admission criteria and selection processes of Canadian dietetic programs: for a diversified and equitable profession	
Total Funds Requested:		
	Principal Investigators' Information	
	Principal Investigator	Principal Co-Investigator
Name:		
Credentials:		
Professional Title:	Assistant professor, Department of Nutrition, Université de Montréal; Researcher, Centre Jean-Jacques-Gauthier, CIUSSS Nord-de-l'Île-de-Montréal	
Mailing Address:	Local 1262 Pavillon Liliane de Stewart 2405, chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine Montréal (Québec) H3T 1A8	
Email Address:		
Tel. Number:		
Can. Dietetics Regulatory Body # and DC Member #	Dietitians of Canada 104180 College of Dietitians of Ontario 13687 Ordre des Diététistes-Nutritionnistes Québec 4726	Dietitians of Canada 23217 College of Dietitians of Ontario 4180
	Co-Investigators' Information	
	Co-Investigator (1)	Co-Investigator (2)
Name:		
Credentials:		
Professional Title:	Dietetic Education Coordinator Hamilton Health Sciences, Brescia University College	
DC Membership Number [where applicable]:	Dietitians of Canada 19876 College of Dietitians of Ontario 3480	



	Co-Investigator (3)	Co-Investigator (4)
Name:		
Credentials:		
Professional Title:		
DC Membership Number [where applicable]:		
Sponsoring Institution Information		
Name of Sponsoring Institution to administer the Grant Funds:	Integrated university health and social services centre (CIUSSS) Nord-de-l'Île-de-Montréal, referred to as CIUSSS NIM	
Institution's Charitable Registration Number:		
Designated Institution's Financial Officer to administer the Grant Funds		
Name:		
Official Title:		
Mailing Address:		
Email Address:		
Telephone Number:		



Agreement and Signatures

Signing this application form constitutes an agreement of the terms and conditions set out in the CFDR Grant Policy and Application Guide.

Principal Investigator

Co-Principal Investigator

Name:

Signature:

Maude Perreault

Date:

PI's Department Head/ Supervisor

Co-PI's Department Head/ Supervisor

Name:

Signature:

Valerio Nobile

Date:

20 october, 2023

23 october, 2023

Authorized Sponsoring Institution Officer

Name:

Title:

Email:

Signature:

[Signature]

Date:

Project Details	
Does this project include Human participants? Insert: YES / NO	
If yes, evidence of approval of local review committee must be provided before the grant can be funded. Is the approval included or is it pending? Insert: INCLUDED / PENDING	
If the project is funded, when will it begin?	
Intended duration of project? Insert: ONE / TWO Years	
Where will the project be carried out?	Université de Montréal and Centre-Jean-Jacques-Gauthier (CIUSSS NIM)
Is there participation of other institutions agencies? Insert: YES/NO If yes, attach letters of agreement to collaborate	
Previous Funding Information	
Have you previously received funding from CFDR? Insert: YES/NO	
If Yes, list title of project(s) and year(s) of award(s):	
Have the final reports been submitted to CFDR? Insert: Yes / No / NA	
If No, provide explanation:	



List up to 5 Grants held by the Principal Investigator (s) and members of the team in the last 5 years:

External Reviewers

List 3 Suggestions for External Reviewers

List name, mailing address, telephone, email address and area of expertise.

If more room is required, attached separate sheet to this form. Please adhere to criteria for suggesting External Reviewers.

1. Leah Cahill, PhD, RD/PDt

Howard Webster Department of Medicine Research Chair, Associate professor, Dalhousie University

Mailing Address: Centre for Clinical Research, 5790 University Avenue, Suite 225

Halifax, NS, B3H 1V7

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Email: leah.cahill@dal.ca

Area of expertise: dietetics (inpatient, outpatient, and public health) with a focus on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Access, patient-centered research, patient-oriented research

2. Tamara Cohen, PhD RD

Assistant professor, Director of Dietetics in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia

Mailing Address: Room 218, 2205 East Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T1Z4

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Decolonization of the dietetics curriculum

Area of expertise: Non-Indigenous Cultural Safety Facilitator at UBC, Senior author on a recent publication on the topic of diversifying and decolonising dietetics: Confronting Colonialism in Canadian Dietetics Curricula (Stein et al. Can J Diet Pract Res. 2023 epub).

3. Daphne Lordly, DEd., MAHE, PDt

Professor, Mount Saint Vincent University

Mailing Address: Evaristus 313, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 2J6

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Area of expertise: dietetic education and the socialization of dietetic students and practitioners, with an interest in how gender is implicated in these processes