

## Career Development in Nutrition and Dietetics: Carving Out Your Own Route

**W**HAT IT MEANS TO PURSUE a career path in the current US work environment has changed in recent decades—namely, in that there is, in a sense, no such thing as a “career path.” Whereas jobs were once limited by the available technologies—and job opportunities were constrained by limited transportation systems, modes of communication, the tendency of individuals to take root where they were raised, and narrowly defined levels of education—some employment categories have been wiped out entirely, and there is no longer an expectation that workers will stay at the same job for life. Furthermore, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics—in data measured before the effects of the recession in the 2000s were seen—beginning with the youngest baby boomers, US workers hold an average of 11 jobs before age 42.<sup>1</sup>

The field of dietetics being as diverse as the individuals who practice within it, there is likewise no such thing as “the pathway to a career in dietetics.” Even dietetics practitioners who begin their careers with a firm sense of their career goals might find themselves rethinking their path along the way, as new focus areas of practice emerge or as their interests evolve.

Members of a Workgroup with the Council on Future Practice (see the first Text Box) interviewed five registered dietitians (RDs) in late 2011 and early 2012 to learn about the respective routes they took to their current careers in dietetics. The interviews with these five RDs—Margaret Garner, MS, RD, LD; Carrie Snow, RD; Debe Nagy-Nero, MS, RD; Elaine Ayres, MS, RD; and Sylvia Emberger, RD, LDN—demon-

strate the wide range of academic and professional experiences that can influence how individuals might determine the type of dietetics career that fits their interests and then identify the avenues to make it happen.

### THE DIETETICS CAREER DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

The dietetics career development guide (see the Figure) was established by the Council on Future Practice. Based on the five-stage Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition, the dietetics career development guide allows practitioners to self-assess their own level of expertise—be it novice, beginner, competent,

proficient, advanced practice, or expert—while clarifying how each of these levels is defined and emphasizing the need for lifelong learning and professional development as the means to increasing competencies and thus ascending to higher levels of practice.

See the second Text Box for information on where to access the dietetics career development guide and additional Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics career development tools.

### Margaret Garner, MS, RD, LD

Although Margaret Garner has been with the University of Alabama–Tusca-

From 2011–2012, each of these interviewers spent hours preparing for, scheduling, and conducting professional interviews with career-savvy members. The interviewers teamed up to develop consistent questions that elicited from each interviewee the novel ways that the dietetics career development guide can be useful to keep their career trajectory on an upward climb.

The interviewers are Mary Cluskey, PhD, RD, associate professor and Dietetics Internship director, Department of Nutrition and Exercise Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis; Mary Kay Meyers, PhD, RD, chair, Human Nutrition and Hospitality Management, Human Environmental Sciences, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; and Anne Marie Kis-Duryea, MS, RD, LDN, adjunct professor, Thomas Jefferson University and Community College of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, and a private health coach serving individual clients and corporations. These members are part of the Council on Future Practice, which works in collaboration with the Commission on Dietetic Registration and Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education to project the future practice needs for the profession of dietetics. The Council is a committee of the Academy's Council on Future Practice. To learn more about the Council on Future Practice check out its web page at <http://www.eatright.org/futurepractice/>.

### Academy Employment Resources for Dietetics Practitioners

The Academy offers a wealth of resources for assisting dietetics practitioners with all facets of the career trajectory.

- Dietetics Career Development Guide (<http://www.eatright.org/Members/content.aspx?id=7665>). These materials, created by the Council on Future Practice, explain the definitions of levels of practice—novice, beginner, competent, proficient, advanced practice, and expert—and the difference between “specialist,” “focus area of practice,” and “advanced practice.” Scenarios that show how these designations can be applied in various practice settings are available as well.
- Career Toolbox (<http://www.eatright.org/BecomeanRDorDTR/content.aspx?id=8136>). This online resource gives access to a multitude of career tools:
  - Resume templates, cover letters, and tips on how to brand yourself better
  - Access to Eat Right Careers, which gives members the opportunity to view job postings and subscribe to job alerts
  - Mentoring and career guidance opportunities
  - Access to the Academy's Interactive Salary Tool
  - Volunteer opportunities

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loosa for 30+ years, her roles have shifted and evolved thanks to her proactive pursuit of new opportunities for promoting dietetics. Her current position is multifaceted: she is the assistant dean of health education and outreach (since 2006), an assistant professor (since 1979), then associate professor of family medicine, and director of Nutrition Education and Services for University Medical Center (since 1979) in the College of Community Health Sciences; director of the Department of Health Promotion and Wellness in the Student Health Center (since 2005); and an adjunct professor in Human Nutrition and Hospitality Management (previously called Food, Nutrition, and



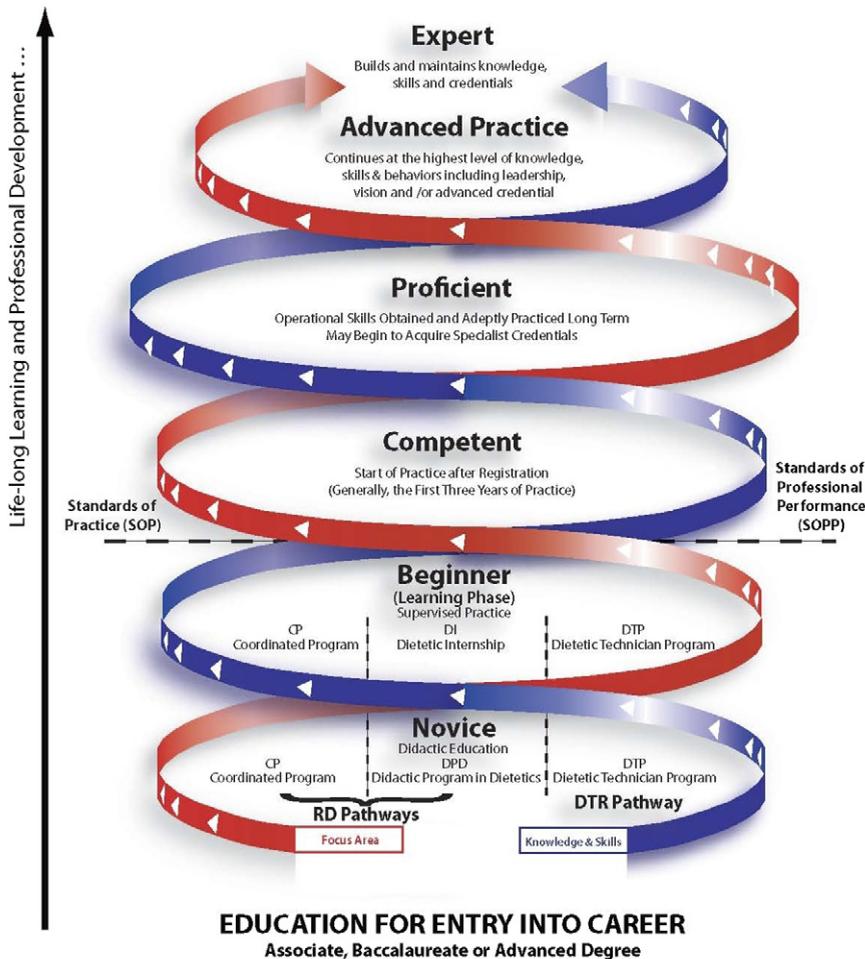
**Margaret Garner, MS, RD, LD**

Institution Management) (since 1979), where she had been on faculty for 5 years. A busy life like this is standard for Garner, who notes that an early piece of

advice—“Go for the broadest experience possible”—is the one that has resonated with her the most.

Garner’s route to her current role was, in many ways, of her own making. After completing a bachelor’s degree in home economics at Georgia Southern College and a master’s degree in nutrition (with a minor in public health) at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville, she also completed a postgraduate fellowship in nutrition and developmental disorders at the Child Development Center at the University of Tennessee–Memphis. She took her first job as a nutritionist in the Department of Community Health and Medical Care in St Louis, MO, where she worked in chronic disease, maternal and child health, well child, and family planning clinics and taught interns. It was during this time that she realized that her career goals were shifting, and although she wanted to continue to practice as a clinical RD, she wanted that to be secondary to a career in teaching—and she wanted to return to the South. And so she made a phone call to a consultant she knew in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and 2 months later, a member of the University of Alabama called her about teaching in a dietetics program with a community nutrition emphasis. However, this proactive approach to making her career happen was not a one-off event. Speaking her mind about changes that could be made to the curriculum to a site visitor led to an appointment on the Academy’s Committee on Accreditation, which, in turn, led to additional appointments to education committees and the Commission on Accreditation for Dietetic Education (now called the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics) and a 30-year stretch of elected or volunteer work at the national level. Furthermore, when the university established a family medicine program, she approached the dean of the Community Health Sciences with a proposal: “I will do guest lectures in nutrition for free to your residents if you will provide me with an opportunity to provide a private practice model for my students.” This proposal led to nutrition counseling opportunities at the ambulatory medical center for the family practice residency program as well as in a small group practice in a rural area that included consultation at a small hospital, nursing

**Dietetics Career Development Guide**



**Definition of Dietetics:** Dietetics is the integration, application and communication of principles derived from food, nutrition, social, business and basic sciences, to achieve and maintain optimal nutrition status of individuals through the development, provision and management of effective food and nutrition services in a variety of settings.

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**Figure.** Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Career Development Guide.

home, and health department for Garner's students. It also led to an opportunity for Garner herself. She was teaching full-time, supervising students at the multiple sites, and traveling 50 miles for 1 full day and 2 half-days each week, so when the family practice clinic at the university asked Garner for more of her time, she told them she didn't have any more time to give. Instead, she convinced them to create a full-time RD position with faculty and clinical appointments—arguing that “They need to know that you value their work, and making the RD have a position like the medical faculty is how you show it”—helped the clinic to write a grant proposal for creating the position and the associated candidate search materials, and agreed to help with interviewing. However, after conducting one interview, she recused herself from the search committee, as she realized that this was the job she wanted.

Garner credits her success in determining—and attaining—her ideal job structure to placing a high value on education. A staunch advocate for the creation of a practice doctorate in dietetics, Garner has applied the wisdom her parents imparted onto her early on in her daily life and in counseling students: “For the privilege of an education comes the responsibility of giving back—to your community, your profession, and your faith community.” Just as the dietetics career development guide suggests lifelong learning, Garner recommends taking full advantage of the short-term learning opportunities that present themselves, as they can greatly enhance knowledge and skills required of working with others. One particular example that she has found very useful in teaching, counseling, and administrative activities has been the process of becoming a certified intrinsic coach. Such targeted, continuous learning, as well as continued support from mentors and mentoring others, is an invaluable asset to career and personal development.

Garner also emphasizes that she has benefited greatly from building relationships at every stage of her education and employment and listening to the advice of people with more experience—noting also that through observing, practitioners may learn about techniques and strategies, and in turn, learn their own style. “There have been mentors along

the way who have taken a risk and given me a chance or have given me such good advice that it helped me make better decisions than I would have on my own . . . they can enrich your life as you, in turn, can enrich others' lives—when you are truly willing to give back.”

## Carrie Snow, RD

School foodservice was not originally on Carrie Snow's vision board for where she expected to end up, but it certainly has emerged as where her professional passions lie. The time she spent working in the Portland Public School system solidified this interest.

Inspired by a long-standing love for cooking and food, coupled with a growing interest in food systems while earning her undergraduate degree in environmental studies in 1999 from the University of Colorado–Boulder, Snow pursued a certificate in whole foods and non-Western traditional cooking from the Boulder School of Natural Cookery. However, once this summer program ended, she pursued work in environmental science, working with environmental consulting firms, first in California and then in Florida (she moved because her spouse had been transferred). Although she'd built up several important professional skills in that time, including written communication skills and interacting with clients, she kept feeling a tug back toward food.

A few years later, after another transfer and another move—to Portland, OR—and unable to find a job right away, Snow enrolled in the Le Cordon Bleu culinary arts program. But, after much internal dialogue, she knew she still wanted more. “I was seeking more of a background in food sciences and had been loosely exploring the world of dietetics,” she says, re-emphasizing that. “I wanted to maintain being in the sciences and combine it with my passion for food.”

While studying nutrition at Portland State University, Snow took a job as manager of an artisanal bakery—her first management experience, where she developed skills in supervising staff, developing a training program, working with vendors, and managing purchase orders and inventory. Once her coursework became more rigorous, Snow stepped down as manager but stayed on to coordinate the bakery's Saturday farmer's market program—a modification that at the time seemed like merely an act of time man-



Carrie Snow, RD

agement but that later proved to be a strategic windfall once she went to work in the Portland Public Schools.

Snow later procured a role as a research assistant in the Bionutrition Unit research kitchen of the Oregon Clinical and Translational Research Institute at Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU). Her primary responsibilities were helping to produce meals and testing recipes for feeding studies. Although her culinary background was a tremendous asset in obtaining this position, she may not have been given the chance had she not sent a letter to the RD heading up the program. And in being proactive, she ultimately reaped more than what she originally set out to do. Not only did she get to use her culinary background in creating recipes for an anti-inflammatory diet study, which were ultimately published in a cookbook, she also made contacts at OHSU who proved to be helpful in launching her career. One contact needed administrative help with her private practice—giving Snow the opportunity to hone her writing skills while working on educational materials and a monthly newsletter, customer service skills while answering the phones, and clinical skills while observing nutrition assessments—and another contact sent Snow a fateful e-mail (just as she was finishing her internship) to tell her about a job opening to be a program manager in the Nutrition Services Department in the Portland Public Schools.

“I wouldn't have found the posting if she hadn't sent the e-mail,” Snow says.

“School nutrition wasn’t on my radar.” The job description matched her interests and experience—again, her culinary background was a tremendous asset, but so was the management experience she’d gained at the bakery and her overarching interest in food systems. She was hired to manage operations at 18 schools in the city, but a retirement and a promotion within the department opened up a perfect opportunity in menu management that allowed her to also manage various programs, such as a local foods initiative, “harvest of the month,” and “chefs move to schools” programs. This is where Snow’s previous work with the farmer’s market came to be of previously unseen value: “The contacts I made along the way have been incredibly helpful in my new role in school nutrition, such as securing farmers to participate in the ‘harvest of the month’ program. It was much easier because I already had the contacts,” she says.

Snow believes that personal connections—networks, friendships, and mentoring relationships—can have a big influence on a person’s career, but she stresses that the biggest impact depends on what’s already within the individual: “Those relationships can really help to define you and the direction you want to take ... but the area of practice needs to resonate with you. For example, in my time at OHSU, although I loved it there, I didn’t have the same emotional reaction to clinical research dietetics that I do in school foodservice now. I feel this ‘click’.”

Although she wasn’t expecting to make a career move so soon, another transfer has brought Snow to the east coast, where she is now self-employed as a nutrition and culinary consultant. “This is something I had considered doing anyway, but it seemed premature, only being in the Portland schools for 2½ years. I had envisioned it, it just pushed me sooner in my career than I expected. Having a husband in the armed forces, I have to be flexible with my career.” However, she also believes that because RDs, in general, have such a diverse background of skills, career flexibility is essential.

Snow cannot emphasize enough how much the people she has met along the way have helped her in following the twists and turns in her career path. Her transition to consulting on the east coast was facilitated by a friend with a similar

background (school foodservice and culinary) who connected her to contacts he knew in the region. The collegial relationship she has maintained with the Portland schools may result in some consulting job opportunities as well.

Snow considered herself lucky to have happened into the role at the schools and is adapting to her new role, but she is also cognizant of the knowledge gaps she needs to address and readily embraces the concept of lifelong learning that figures so prominently into the dietetics career development guide. When she was at the Portland schools, for example, she believed she needed more skills in procurement, so she signed up for training at the National School Foodservice Management Institute. She was also making a plan for addressing other areas for improvement when the transfer came through; because another transfer, perhaps overseas, may be imminent, she is considering the possibility of obtaining another credential, a master’s degree in public health, via an online program.

She also recommends professional affiliations and partnerships as a means for networking and for growing within the profession and for growing within the profession and a focus area of practice. In addition to her Academy membership, Snow is a member of the School Nutrition Association and, when in Portland, partnered with groups such as EcoTrust, a nonprofit that works to support policies and practices for sustainable local food systems and farm-to-school legislation, and Growing Gardens, a local organization that was instrumental in helping Snow and her colleagues at Portland schools with the startup of gardens in low-income schools.

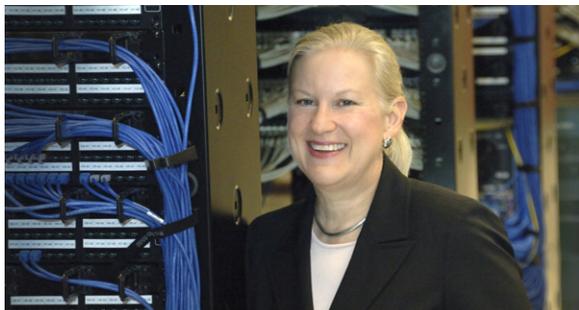
Snow says that the best piece of advice she ever came across—something that she wrote onto a sticky note and keeps affixed to her computer—is “The most important measure of your success is how you treat other people.” This concept, which is frequently on her mind, underscores her repeated emphasis of the importance of building relationships through every stage of the career. While she was still in Portland, she said, “I am dealing with people all day long—angry parents, upset principals, difficult employees. And I always look to that quote when taking a phone call, and it really reminds me that building relationships can help with success.”

### Elaine Ayres, MS, RD

Elaine Ayres’ career trajectory in 30-plus years has mostly taken place at one location—the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, MD. After receiving bachelor’s and master’s of science degrees in nutrition from Cornell University and the University of Maryland, respectively, her career has taken many twists and turns, from her being hired as a clinical research RD working on human subject protocols in 1980 to her current role, since 2008, as deputy chief in the NIH Clinical Center’s Laboratory for Informatics Development. During her tenure in clinical dietetics, she became very involved with the department’s computer systems and developed an interest in administrative activities. Her titles in between those anchor positions included dietitian/nutrition specialist (1990–1992), senior dietitian (1992–1997), senior administrative officer (1997–1999), deputy chief operating officer (1999–2001), and assistant director for ethics and technology development (2001–2008).

Ayres notes that the jump from senior dietitian to senior administrative officer represented a very steep learning curve. After working in clinical research protocols for 17 years, she had to develop or bolster skills in human resource management, purchasing and contracts, financial management, and budgeting. She credits her undergraduate and internship training in management with preparing her for taking on this role—something that many students may take for granted. “At the time you are going through the undergraduate program and take a wide swath of courses, you may think ‘Why am I doing this? I really want to be doing *this* particular thing when I get out of school,’” she says. “But when you look in the rearview mirror at those experiences, they are extremely helpful.” In fact, many of the interviewees who spoke with the Council on Future Practice Workgroup noted that they wished they could retake their undergraduate business management courses, as they now have a stronger context for practical applications of the course content.

The decision to apply for the administrative officer role was helped along by colleagues’ encouragement. Ayres consulted with several individuals in the hospital administration about her future goals, but when a new adminis-



**Elaine Ayres, MS, RD**

trative structure was being developed, one particular conversation really set her in motion for this career switch. The chief operating officer of the hospital approached Ayres and said, “You can stay where you are, and you will probably become director of the Nutrition Department if that’s what you want over time. But you never know about these other opportunities, where they might lead your career, if you don’t try.”

Ayres took this advice to heart, realizing that to move forward, she had to try something new and learn new skills outside of her comfort zone. And this new role, she notes, “has taken me in some directions I would have never thought about when I got my master’s degree.”

Moving through her career, Ayres has noticed a very important skill that practitioners should strive to incorporate in how they perceive their roles with their employer, particularly with larger employers. “You can bring a lot of skills to the job, but the best skill is asking, ‘Where does the organization have a void?’”

As Ayres’ interest in computers grew, she became a project manager for upgrading the NIH hospital systems, including implementation of new electronic health record keeping, upgrading the computer-based nutrition system, and the integration of these applications. This also led to involvement in developing an electronic ethics management system, allowing the organization to manage complex issues related to conflict of interest in a research environment. “I thought it needed attention in terms of how we do our work and the conflicts that arise from it—and developing technology not just from an IT perspective but for a particular line of work,” she says, and, fortunately, “I was given wide latitude to explore and develop these programs.” In her present position, Ayres serves as the project manager for the Biomedical Trans-

lational Research Information System, or BTRIS, a clinical research data repository for the NIH.

Nutrition informatics is a fledgling area of practice, and it encompasses so many components of business, so in her quest to learn and develop professionally, Ayres did not limit her scope when seeking out mentors. She looked outside of dietetics for mentors and found them in hospital administrators, ethicists, attorneys, informaticians, and others she met along the way who were willing to answer questions and teach her about what she needed to know. “Anybody can be a mentor. When we look at our current construct of how we do our training, the notion of a preceptor can change,” she says. “The notion of using anybody, anytime, anywhere, to be a preceptor is possible.”

In addition to consideration for finding mentors beyond dietetics, in emerging practice arenas that are still in development, practitioners will occasionally have to look beyond dietetics for growth opportunities. “I pursued coursework in biomedical informatics developed for other disciplines by the American Medical Informatics Association,” she says. “I also took a National Library of Medicine weeklong intensive course as a supported fellow.” RDs who are interested in informatics should know that a course for nutrition informatics has since been developed—a collaboration of the American Medical Informatics Association, OHSU, and the Academy—that is available only for Academy members. Ayres was a student in the first class; now she is one of the instructors of this course.

Although there are career opportunities in nutrition informatics as full-time employment, Ayres notes that for those who simply use informatics as part of their daily work life, it’s not essential to

become an expert. “It’s OK to be a research expert but an informatics beginner,” she says. “The professional model from other disciplines is that informaticists are there to help practitioners do their job better, so not everybody *needs* to be an informatics expert. But everybody in this day and age needs basic information management and technology skills.”

Still, like the other interviewees, Ayres believes that an open mind to all opportunities is essential. “All careers are additive,” Ayres notes. “Never begrudge the opportunity to pick up another skill, even if you think it’s outside of the box. At the end of the day, you’ll find that everything you have learned along the way is useful.”

She does clarify, however, that this concept doesn’t apply to successes alone. “You learn from your mistakes. You always have the ability to move on and learn from those mistakes and make yourself a better contributor to the organization. I have to say that I couldn’t do what I’m doing now without all the skills that I’ve picked up along the way.”

### **Sylvia Emberger, RD, LDN**

Becoming an RD was not part of Sylvia Emberger’s early career plans. But 20 years after receiving her undergraduate degree in microbiology from Pennsylvania State University, she completed her dietetics coursework at Messiah College in Grantham, PA, and earned an RD credential while working part-time as a contractor at Hershey Foods (now The Hershey Company), in 1996.

Emberger had long had an interest in cooking and all aspects of food (from gardening to food preparation) and had a burgeoning personal interest in recipe development. While spending time at the library with her young son, she also discovered cookbooks that nurtured her creativity and really piqued her interest in dietetics as a career.

As a nontraditional (returning) student, Emberger says that completing the dietetic internship and passing the credentialing exam may have been one of the proudest moments in her life. She had been traveling back and forth between her family and the internship, which was 2 hours away, for a year that had seen severe snowstorms and flooding. “With all these obstacles, I felt like I accomplished something. It gave me



**Sylvia Emberger, RD, LDN**

more confidence knowing I could do it," she says.

Her first job after becoming credentialed was as a substitute in a local hospital's prenatal clinic for a staff RD on maternity leave, followed by maternity leave substitutions at the same hospital in the cardiology and surgery wards. Ultimately offered a full-time gig at the hospital, Emberger declined, because "The hospital setting didn't feel like a good fit." She took on a 9-year stint in a long-term-care facility after that, believing that the menu and recipe development and clinical responsibilities integral to that setting were more of what she wanted to do. But despite her satisfaction with her well-rounded job responsibilities, there was an extraordinary amount of work required, and she knew that this setting wasn't a good fit either. However, as can happen with busy professionals, inertia had set in and kept her from making a change.

In a conversation with the facility's medical director, when Emberger mused that maybe it was time for a career change, the medical director told her, "Sylvia, move on." Emberger recalls that this affirmation was a relief: "Hearing her say that was almost like receiving permission to do something different." And in permitting herself to make the change, she also took the proactive step of reconnecting with The Hershey Company to see if they had any opportunities. At that time, the company was in the process of changing its labeling program and while the staff was being trained in the new system, Hershey needed a contract worker to manage the old system. Through this opportunity, Emberger learned about package labeling, regulations, and food science

and bolstered her skills in research and marketing—all components that better defined the type of position she was looking for.

She found her dream job in 2008, as a corporate nutritionist with the marketing group for a new health and wellness program at the grocery chain Giant Food Stores, and later as corporate nutritionist for the parent company, Ahold USA. In this role, Emberger stays current on supermarket and food trends, government initiatives, and consumer preferences. She also collaborates with data management professionals to identify healthy foods for a shelf-labeling initiative and provides insights for data tracking and reporting. Developing and analyzing recipes for store publications, and writing for magazines and brochures provides her with creative opportunities.

Business management and writing skills for varied audiences are crucial to success in this type of work. "Food and cooking is what resonates with consumers. Their eyes glaze over when you start talking about antioxidants, percentage of daily value, and so on," Emberger says, in speaking of the need to be able to adapt clinical information into consumer language, which she describes as "simple, but not simplistic." "If you can talk in their language and tell consumers about the delicious taste of an apple or how easy it is to make a dish with five basic ingredients—this is how to reach them."

Even her title, "corporate nutritionist," is the result of a strategic decision to avoid typical consumer inference that "dietitian" automatically means "diet"—"similar to the American Dietetic Association's name change to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics," she says. "It's more consumer-friendly."

She also believes that a stronger program in regulatory issues could be useful to RDs in all areas of practice. "When I was in school it wasn't part of the curriculum because the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act came about in the early 1990s. But it's an important issue. Food manufacturers and grocery stores are now really paying attention to what is 'healthy' or 'low-sodium' [as per the US Food and Drug Administration definitions]." She notes that RDs need to understand how to use the terminology accurately to ensure claims are correct and understood by the public.

Like the other interviewees, Emberger considers a number of people she has met along the way as having provided her with mentoring, whether formally or informally. The most useful mentoring approach she received as her career evolved came from her adviser at Messiah College. "She didn't just give me answers but asked me all the right questions to think about and helped me develop a plan." Emberger uses this same approach with the interns who report to her. "I hope to instill in the interns that inquisitiveness and continuing education—an interest in learning new things—is necessary for them to be successful." That open-mindedness, Emberger says, is particularly useful when career plans don't work out exactly as one might have hoped. "Sometimes, rather than wishing you lived in a different part of the country, or wishing you had done things differently, take advantage of the opportunities that are available. Educate yourself so you yourself can make things happen."

### **Debe Nagy-Nero, MS, RD**

Once Debe Nagy-Nero had decided that she wanted to become an RD, she jumped at any opportunity to get the experiences she knew would be useful in the future. So, the jobs that followed completion of bachelor's and master's degrees in food and nutrition from San Diego State University included line cook for a Navy officers' club in San Diego, dietetic technician at a nursing home, part-time foodservice supervisor at Providence Medical Center, clinical RD and interim department director at a community hospital, a renal RD at Fort Vancouver Kidney Center, corporate RD for a nursing home management company, and adjunct instructor of introductory nutrition courses at the collegiate level. She eventually opened her own consulting business in physician offices.

However, none of these positions reflects the role she currently holds: Director of Quality Assurance, Nutrition, and Safety for the Burgerville restaurant chain (38 restaurants in the Pacific Northwest).

Nagy-Nero recalls that the job posting in the newspaper listed the desirable background for applicants: health inspector, microbiologist, and health educator—with RD at the bottom of the list. "In the interview, they wanted to



**Debe Nagy-Nero, MS, RD**

know why they should want to hire an RD to do the job," she says. "That is, why shouldn't they hire an ex-health inspector? I informed them that I had a much more rounded background than just the bacteria itself, which was not what they needed. I had the education background. I told them all about what RDs do because they also thought RDs only worked in hospitals. And I said, 'You will never know when all my other skills will come in handy.'" She stresses that this is a tactic that dietetics practitioners should be using in general in their job searches. "Aside from our knowledge of the clinical, we need to emphasize what a fantastic background we all have when applying for jobs . . . People seem to be in awe when they realize how vast our background is."

Originally hired as director of food safety in 1999, Nagy-Nero continues to evolve in her role, which now includes working with suppliers, approving all ingredients supplied to the company, performing site visits at the farms where the ingredients are coming from, and menu labeling.

Nagy-Nero specifically attributes the direction her career path has taken to the mentors she has met along the way. For example, when she was working in food-service and clinical roles as a dietetic technician in San Diego with a consultant RD, she says, she got to see what a varied position that role offered and was given the advice that resonated for her: "don't just join the Academy, be a volunteer and get involved." "Volunteering is an opportunity to learn," she says. She has also

pursued volunteer positions with other groups affiliated with her work; she is a member of the Washington State and Local Southwest Washington affiliate dietetic associations, chair of the National Restaurant Association (NRA) Nutrition Executive Study Group, a member of the NRA Quality Assurance Executive Study Group, and chair of the Multnomah County Food Service Advisory Committee (where she participated in updating the Oregon State food code in 2011).

Nagy-Nero places a high value on pursuing all learning opportunities. For example, when she took on the job as a renal RD, she knew only the minimum, that is, what she had been taught in school. So once she took the job, she read extensively on the topic and went to educational meetings to prepare herself more fully—efforts that would likely be rewarded within clinical dietetics. In her current role in the restaurant industry, however, they do not necessarily translate into furthering her career. "My employer has been very supportive of all my volunteer activities because it gets their name out there," she explains, adding that, "It's not necessarily a selling point to employers. I have to pursue continuing education to keep my credentials, but managers in restaurants don't have those same requirements and don't always understand the importance." But she stresses that although her volunteer experiences aren't necessarily professionally strategic, they are personally fulfilling.

Careers in the restaurant industry have potential to emerge as a more robust opportunity for RDs, but this job market currently is in limbo at the regional level as many restaurants are waiting to see whether the national restaurant standards are upheld and implemented. Nagy-Nero offers that she would have an advantage in pursuing restaurant consulting (if she ultimately decided to go that route) because of her existing professional affiliations with the NRA, which has led to extensive industry contacts, but in general RDs might find it difficult to break into this niche. But she encourages interested RDs to take the opportunity now to demonstrate to restaurants the advantage of having an RD on staff.

She notes that because restaurants are for-profit entities, for the most part

they won't spend money on such efforts until they have to. But once legislation mandating menu labeling in restaurants goes into effect, restaurants will be forced to seek out experts in food and nutrition to help them do nutrition analysis of menus and help reformulate. "This is an area that no one else can get into," Nagy-Nero says. "We have food knowledge and nutrition knowledge. Some other professionals have nutrition knowledge, but for this arena, you have to know the food." But, she stresses, in the restaurant industry, the emphasis must be on influencing menu items, not being "food cops," as she says—"That's not who we are."

In addition to all the external activities a dietetics practitioner might use in pursuit of ascending the levels of practice, however, Nagy-Nero stresses that an open mind is key, advice she makes sure to impart to others when preceptoring and mentoring. "When you start your career, unless you have a passion for something specific, you have no idea where your career is going to take you . . . if you are open to it. There are so many different opportunities, you never know what you can create."

## CONCLUSION

Just as patients and clients are counseled so often to be active participants in their own health care, dietetics practitioners benefit from being proactive participants in their own career paths. That the career trajectories of these RDs was kept in motion by making a phone call, by being visible within the organization and national associations and affiliate groups, and by making—and maintaining—personal and professional contacts is a testament to how important it is.

Most of all, using the dietetics career development guide to chart an outline for attaining higher practice levels, while keeping mindful of learning and professional development, will serve as a useful beacon to lead the way.

## Reference

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