

**DIETETICS CAREER  
DEVELOPMENT GUIDE**



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**A Model for Advancement in Dietetic Careers**

**Overview**

The “Helix” is a visual that the Council on Future Practice utilizes to represent our Career Development Guide. This model is the result of a charge given to the Council by the Phase 2 Future Practice & Education Task Force. The task was to develop a tool to help solidify the direction for the profession by outlining a clear understanding of how to advance both laterally and horizontally. After the FNCE 2009 Open Space session regarding a draft guide and input from numerous member and non-member sources, the comments and concerns were consolidated and discussed by the Council. Based on the input received, the initial pyramid shape used as the pictorial guide for career progression from entry to advance practice level was changed to the current “Helix”. The helix shape characterizes a more fluid movement, the ability to be used for different practice areas, represents varied positions within or outside the field by using more than one helix to demonstrate experience and education in dual (or more) roles and/or depict multiple skill areas within one job.

The “Helix” provides a general framework that individuals or dietetic practice groups can now modify to offer specific practice guidance from entry-level to expert/advanced practice level. The goal is to continue to solicit and seek additional input from members working in traditional and non-traditional areas of practice to ensure the Dietetics Career Development Guide represents current and future opportunities for RDNs, NDTRs, students and future Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics members.

## Definition for Terms – Dietetics Career Development Guide

### Overview of Terminology

The terms used in the Guide are based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition (1). The model suggests that as a person acquires and develops a skill, s/he “. . . usually passes through at least five stages of qualitatively different perceptions of his task and/or mode of decision-making as his skill improves.” The stages are: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. The skill-acquisition process has been studied in a number of settings, including the acquisition of nursing skill (2).

In the first two stages of skill acquisition the individual is learning the foundational facts or “rules” of practice. Decision-making and problem-solving tend to be formulaic and rather rigid in these stages. Competent practitioners are adding context to the “rules” and refining their ability to prioritize, weigh alternative approaches, and exercise judgment considering several factors.

The Proficient practitioner has had sufficient experience to approach practice situations as a whole, rather than component parts, and can see how the situation fits into the broader picture and goals. “Experience, as the word is used here, does not refer to the mere passage of time or longevity. Rather it is the refinement of preconceived notions and theory through encounters with many actual practical situations that add nuance or shades of differences to theory (2).”

Additional experience, or “encounters with many actual practical situations,” may lead to the Expert stage. Here the practitioner is immersed in skilled performance and responds intuitively rather than in an analytic manner. For normal situations, the practitioner’s vast experience has developed a sense of what works, and that’s the course of action taken. The Expert certainly can and does use analytical tools, but s/he seldom needs to in the area of expertise.

As is true in many skill areas, not all practitioners will achieve the Expert skill level in dietetics. Further, a person could be at the Proficient or Expert level in his or her focus area of practice but be Competent or even an Advanced Beginner in an unfamiliar focus area. The Dietetics Career Development Guide uses the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition to illustrate how a practitioner, regardless of focus area, can attain increasing levels of knowledge and skill throughout a career.

- (1) Dreyfus HL, Dreyfus SE. *Mind Over Machine*. New York, NY: The Free Press; 1986.
- (2) Benner P. *From Novice to Expert, Commemorative Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Health; 2001.

### **Five Stages of Skill Acquisition (1)**

<b>Skill Level</b>	<b>Components</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Decision</b>	<b>Commitment</b>
1. Novice	Context-free	None	Analytical	Detached
2. Advanced Beginner	Context-free and situational	None	Analytical	Detached
3. Competent	Context-free and situational	Chosen	Analytical	Detached understanding and deciding. Involved in outcome.
4. Proficient	Context-free and situational	Experienced	Analytical	Involved understanding. Detached deciding
5. Expert	Context-free and situational	Experienced	Intuitive	Involved

## **Levels of Education**

### **Novice**

*Definition:* An individual acquiring the didactic foundation of dietetics science and practice. The novice gains increasingly complex knowledge throughout the education program.

*Rationale:* The definition is based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition.

#### *Criteria*

- *Education:* Enrolled in an Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND) accredited dietetics education program (Dietetic Technician Program, Didactic Program in Dietetics, Coordinated Program). The novice must demonstrate acquisition of the ACEND Foundation Knowledge Requirements and Learning Outcomes by the conclusion of the education program.
- *Experience:* Students in a Coordinated Program or Dietetic Technician Program are developing skills at the Beginner level concurrent with the didactic course work. Students enrolled in a Didactic Program in Dietetics may find it advantageous to gain paid or volunteer experience in a dietetics-related area prior to application to a Dietetic Internship.
- *Demonstrated Examples:* Upon satisfactory completion of the Didactic Program in Dietetics, the individual earns a Verification Statement and is qualified to apply to a dietetic internship (or other ACEND-accredited supervised practice experience). The Verification Statement issued at the completion of the Dietetic Technician Program or Coordinated Program signifies the individual is qualified to take the Registration Examination for Dietetic Technicians or apply for an ACEND-accredited supervised practice program for Dietitians.

### **Advanced Beginner**

*Definition:* An individual currently enrolled in the supervised practice phase of dietetics education, either following (as in a dietetic internship) or concurrent with (CP and DTP) the acquisition of didactic knowledge. The Advanced Beginner has a working knowledge of aspects of dietetics science and practice. The Advanced Beginner increases skills and abilities throughout the supervised practice period. Works under supervision of a preceptor and develops increasing levels of autonomy.

*Rationale:* The definition is based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition.

#### *Criteria:*

- *Education:* A graduate of a Didactic Program in Dietetics enrolled in a Dietetic Internship **OR** a student in a Coordinated Program **OR** a Dietetic Technician Program. Note: the individual could also have completed the ACEND Foundation Knowledge requirements following completion of a bachelor's or advanced degree in a related area.
- *Experience:* Must achieve required level of competence in each practice rotation as established by the supervised practice program in accordance with ACEND standards.
- *Demonstrated Examples:* At the conclusion of the Dietetic Internship, Coordinated Program, or Dietetic Technician Program, individual receives a Verification Statement and is qualified to take the Registration Examination for Dietitians or Dietetic Technicians. Passing the registration examination demonstrates competence to enter the profession.

## Levels of Practice

### **Competent**

*Definition:* A dietetics practitioner who has just obtained RDN/NDTR status, starting in an employment situation as a professional, and gains on the job skills as well as tailored continuing education to enhance proficiency and knowledge. This RDN/NDTR starts the technical training and interaction for advancement and breadth of competence.

*Rationale:* The definition is based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition.

*Criteria for Practice:* Obtained CDR registration status and is employable as a professional in dietetics.

- *Education:* Associate, Bachelor or Post Graduate Degree with completion of supervised practice experiences and is post registration.
- *Experience:* Functions at a professional level using science based application learned in the education process and seeks additional learning experiences and networks that will aid in professional competence.
- *Demonstrated Examples:* Individual has successfully completed requirements to sit for and pass the RDN/NDTR exam and is capable of entry-level practice employment. Additional aptitude in training and technical skills in a specified focus area may have been achieved in the education process by the professional.

### **Proficient**

*Definition:* A RDN or NDTR who is three plus years beyond entry into the profession, who has obtained operational job performance skills and is successful in the chosen focus area of practice.

*Rationale:* The definition is based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition.

*Criteria for Practice:* A RDN or NDTR that is employed using dietetic skills with experience as well as continuing education, technical training and or a professional credential (specialist). There is an assurance of competency with proficient achievement in a focus area of practice.

- *Education:* The professional who has achieved the required education for RDN/NDTR may have acquired post entry-level education degree (Bachelors from Associate, Masters from Bachelors, etc) or completed a residency or specialized course work in a focus area of dietetics practice and or attained a Specialist credential.
- *Experience:* Uses an approach to practice which is centered on experience with a professional skill application of a higher level than supervised practice, uses broad application of knowledge required for specific practice situations, maintains an active network of professionals germane to the focus area, and is active in team work and leadership using an effective level of communication and interaction with others to positively influence the practice area
- *Demonstrated Examples:*
  1. Obtains formal education degree or credential to show evidence of a higher level of practice ability or training to further skill level
  2. Participates in research
  3. Identified as a well-known speaker or published in focus area of practice
  4. Sought after for practice and operational advice.

## **Expert**

*Definition:* A RDN or NDTR who is recognized within the profession and has mastered the highest degree of skill in or knowledge of a certain focus or generalized area of nutrition and dietetics through additional knowledge, experience, or training. An expert has the ability to immediately see “what” is happening and “how” to approach the situation. An expert can easily use the skills within the field of dietetics to become successful through the application of these skills to areas that may fall outside those in the traditional profession. Experts practice autonomously, accurately, and efficiently in a certain focus or generalized area of nutrition and dietetics and continue to engage in leadership activities.

*Rationale:* The definition of Expert is based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition and is inclusive of advanced practice, including the Commission on Dietetic Registration’s advanced practice credential in clinical nutrition.

### *Criteria for Practice*

- *Education:* The RDN or NDTR may obtain additional degrees (Bachelors, Masters, PhD, etc.) in addition to years of significant on-the job training. This individual may have additional credentials in more than one focus area of practice based on job experience and career choices. Obtaining additional credentials is one way of demonstrating expert level of practice, however, an individual may be an expert in nutrition and dietetics or a particular focus area without possessing additional practice credentials.
- *Experience:* The practitioner transcends reliance on rules, guidelines, and maxims. The practitioner uses “intuitive grasp of situations based on deep, tacit understanding” and has a “vision of what is possible”. Uses the “analytical approaches” in new situations plus patterns of recognition to plan as well as diagnosis.
- *Demonstrated Examples:*
  1. May obtain credentials in more than one focus area of practice based on years of experience and career choices
  2. Achieves peer recognition, such as contributions to evident-based knowledge and potential publishing in peer-reviewed journals
  3. Mentors peers and those identified below expert in the Career Development Guide for the purpose of betterment of the individuals and the profession of dietetics.
  4. For examples of practice at the expert level, refer to scenarios #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #9, and #10 in the Guide to Using the Nutrition and Dietetics Career Development Scenarios.