

The Future of Dietetics

By Lindsay Dalluge

This is an excellent time to be on the path toward becoming a dietitian as we are in the midst of a significant shift regarding our approach to nutrition counseling. Of course, I am alluding to the field of nutrigenomics. To find out what students should be doing now to prepare, I spoke with leading nutrigenomics expert Ruth DeBusk, PhD, RD (pictured below).

Nutrigenomics allows dietitians to be more targeted and effective in their interventions. Every process in the body involves one or more genes and every person has different gene variations. With the ability to decode the genotype of individuals, we can use environmental factors, including nutrition, to improve health and prevent disease. Dr. DeBusk believes dietitians should be the prime source of expertise for the emerging field and is optimistic that within a generation, nutrigenomics will be commonplace. This may seem far off, but by becoming acquainted with the information early on we can be the leaders in this field as well as assure its continued development. An unlimited number of opportunities exist in the broad fields of research, education, and clinical work.

Although many of us will not have formal genetics training, we can take measures to ensure that we will be able to actively participate in the nutrigenomics revolution. Start by reading a book on the topic (try one written by Dr. DeBusk!), keep up with the emerging literature, and if possible, take an introductory genetics course. It is crucial that you become comfortable with primary literature and be able to judge the validity and reliability of research studies. If it seems overwhelming, don't despair, it will get easier with time; in fact genetics is very logical once you begin to understand the language.

Students should also cultivate a few key skills including independence and assertiveness. It can be easy for the dietitian to take a back seat in a setting such as a hospital; learn to fight that urge to shy away from leader roles. Without leaders, there will be no progress and this great opportunity will have been wasted on us. What we do is important and we need to step up and show the world just how valuable we are. Do not forget to always work hard and be knowledgeable about your field because your dedication will be apparent to those around you. Also work on critical thinking skills, counseling skills, and confidence. In addition, business skills will also be of utmost importance as Dr. DeBusk sees a great deal of dietitians going into private practice in the future.

The typical path most dietetic students are on, including the internship, is a good start but you must own the experience. Make it work for you and ask for what you want. It would be beneficial to find a mentor because he or she can be a great source of information and insight. Dr. DeBusk also advises students to seriously consider earning an advanced degree.

If this topic interests you, Dr. DeBusk suggests familiarizing yourself with functional medicine. Check out www.functionalmedicine.org to get started. The Nutrition in Complementary Care dietetic practice group of the American Dietetic Association is also a great source of cutting-edge information. Position yourself now to take advantage of the significant opportunities that are available to us.

Lindsay is currently a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is completing a B.S. in Family Consumer Science with a concentration in dietetics. She can be reached at lindsay.dalluge@yahoo.com.