

***Understanding the Current Context of Leadership Development Through  
Dietetic Education in Canada***

Billie Jane Hermosura, University of Ottawa, Canada

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**Abstract**

Background: Leadership education includes individual development and learning from effective leaders. Evidence in the literature suggest education leaders and curriculum designers should revise health professions education to include a more explicit focus on leadership. In Canada there is a new competency domain related to dietetic leadership, however little is known about Canadian dietitians' leadership development.

Method: To develop a foundational understanding of how leadership skills are currently taught in dietetic education in Canada, a documentary analysis of 13 Canadian dietetic programs and a focus group interview with dietetic educators was conducted as one phase of a doctoral study. The interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. A data extraction tool was used to analyze the program documents and thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcript.

Results: Findings demonstrate that leadership development may not be explicit in dietetic education, but transferrable skills aligned with leadership emerged. The notion of self-leadership and participating in extracurricular activities were also emphasized in the focus group interview. The role of the educator is important in informing, designing, and delivering the program. In addition to their teaching roles, educators play a critical role in shaping learners' professional identity and career path.

Conclusion: Leadership is important in dietetics and can be cultivated through dietetic education and further developed throughout dietetic practice. To best understand the context of leadership in dietetic education and practice, it is important to understand how it is currently taught in different programs as well as practicing dietitians' perspectives.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Health Professions Education, Competencies, Dietetics

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## Introduction

Competency standards are needed in health professions to ensure practitioners have the abilities required to meet the needs of the people they serve (Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada [Royal College], n.d.). For example, CanMEDS is a framework that groups physician abilities under seven roles, whereby a competent physician integrates the competencies of all seven roles into their practice (Royal College, n.d.). In Canada, the Integrated Competencies of Dietetic Education and Practice (ICDEP) was recently revised to include leadership as part of a new competency domain. The ICDEP has *Practice Competencies* embedded throughout seven interrelated *Domains of Competence*. The ICDEP is useful for education programs to guide curriculum and assessment of candidate learning outcomes, creating specifications for the Canadian Dietetic Registration Exam, and evaluating compliance with dietetic education programs' accreditation standard. Perhaps more importantly, however, is that the ICDEP provides a common understanding of entry-level dietetic practice.

Despite the need for competency standards, professional education has not kept pace with healthcare challenges, largely because of fragmented, outdated, and static curricula that produce ill-equipped graduates (Frenk et al., 2010). One area that some suggest needs greater development is leadership skills (Brewer et al., 2016; Frank, Snell, et al., 2015). Leadership in the health sector continues to be recognized as a key factor in improving healthcare (Marchildon & Fletcher, 2016). Leadership skills can help health professionals work effectively in a dynamic environment, promote collaborative practice, and minimize siloed work.

Leadership education includes individual development and learning from effective leaders (Buschlen & Guthrie, 2014). Evidence in the literature suggest education leaders and curriculum designers should revise health professions education to include a more explicit focus on leadership (Beacham et al., 2017; Bradd et al., 2019; Frenk et al., 2010). Literature related to leadership and dietetics stems from traditional areas of dietetic practice in clinical nutrition and foodservice management, where leadership tends to relate to positional authority a dietitian might have (Arensberg, et al., 2019; Morris & Matthews, 2014; Patten et al., 2021). Limited research that investigates leadership and dietetics from the perspective of competency-based education (Boyce, 2014; Tweedie et al., 2021).

Dietitians continue to find their place within the health care hierarchy and explore how they recognized as leaders in the healthcare system (Partnership for Dietetic Education and Practice, 2020). As part of a doctoral study which aims to understand the ways in which dietitians develop leadership and use leadership skills in practice, the objective of this paper is to discuss the ways leadership skills are currently taught in dietetic education in Canada.

## Methods

The doctoral study had a three-phase qualitative design which involved a diverse array of data collection techniques and methods (Hermosura, 2022). This paper focuses on Phase I of the study, which addresses the research question, “in what ways are leadership skills currently taught in dietetic education in Canada?” Although there were three distinct phases, the phases were interconnected and results in one phase influenced work in another. Triangulation was achieved by employing multiple methods for collecting and analyzing data, redundancy in

data collection, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives to clarify meaning (Farmer et al., 2006; Stake, 2006).

Phase I included a documentary analysis of a selection of program documents, and then a focus group with dietetic educators. To develop a foundational understanding of 13 dietetic programs in Canada, publicly available program documents were gathered through an online search of program website; the process started mid-January 2020. Additional program documents were sent from eight programs. Curriculum document analysis was conducted using a standardized extraction tool. Then, the preliminary findings from the documentary analysis were presented to the focus group. A 90-minute focus group discussion with four dietetic educators occurred in March 2020. Additional focus groups were planned, however participant attrition occurred due to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the focus group interview was to obtain insights from dietetic educators about their programs by providing educators with the opportunity to validate and/or elaborate on the findings from the document analysis. A thematic analysis of interview transcript was conducted.

## **Findings**

The documentary analysis in Phase I included a review of publicly available information on websites (i.e., admission requirements such as portfolios, resources for prospective students, promotional materials, survey results, and technical reports) and course documents (i.e., course outlines, schedules or syllabi, course assignment details, performance assessments or rubrics, and internship education program manuals). The documents were analyzed against pre-identified ICDEP 2013 competencies related to leadership. In addition, other ways leadership might be taught in their respective courses beyond the minimum practice competency were considered. Based on the documents reviewed, limited information on the details of the various activities, how students are evaluated, and innovative strategies that programs integrate into courses were available.

Preliminary findings of the website review and documentary analysis provided a sense of how skills related to leadership were reflected in dietetic education, considering leadership was not a core competency at the time of the data collection and analysis. Based on the website review, many programs identified that at the time of application to a dietetics program, which may include an integrated internship, students are expected to possess personal characteristics related to communication skills and self-direction. Programs offer a range of in-class activities that develop students' dietetic professional practice, communication, and management skills, which also contribute to developing leadership skills.

The most common activities across all programs were working on group assignments, creating, and delivering presentations, reading special topics articles, and listening to guest speakers. Other activities that some programs integrated into their courses were writing blogs and creating podcasts or infographics. Students regularly contribute to the learning of others through group discussions, presentations, writing blogs, and creating other media. Students also participate in practice-based research which develops their professional practice. They conduct literature reviews, contribute to Practice-Evidence-based Nutrition pathways, and complete research projects. To develop their ability to manage projects and achieve results, they learn to develop business or new product plans, as well as develop and monitor nutrition care plans. While it was evident that programs planned and supported some skills

development (e.g., critical self-reflection, communication with a variety of audiences) through their courses, it was less evident how they are taught or evaluated. Based on these preliminary findings, I developed questions I wanted to ask the focus group participants.

The focus group interview provided an opportunity for me to gather additional insights from dietetic educators, whose perspectives elaborated on the findings from my documentary analysis. The focus group participants elaborated on the preliminary document analysis findings by providing detailed descriptions of their dietetics programs and what they believed to be the ways in which they taught leadership. This phase aligned with the macro-level of my conceptual framework and sought to better understand the connection of system structures including education requirements. Thus, taken together, the documentary analysis and focus group interview situated the current context of dietetic education by drawing a more fulsome picture of the connection between program curricula and the ICDEP.

The four dietetic educators who participated in the focus group reacted to the preliminary document analysis findings and reflected on their own experiences with their respective programs. First, there appears to be consensus that aspects of leadership can be taught, in particular skills related to self-leadership. They concurred with the document analysis, and provided more context of the ways in which students learn leadership skills. Second, in addition to the experiences offered by the program, many students further develop their skills from extracurricular activities, resulting in some students advancing into leadership roles in student organizations. In class, students contribute to several group assignments whereby they strengthen their communication skills and teamwork abilities. The educators also said students take on extracurricular activities to further develop their skills and enhance their resume. Lastly, educators have a role to play in shaping the curricula. While many dietetic educators are quite passionate about the work they teach, they are often faced with systemic barriers which can prevent them from fully contributing to the program. They are often faced with workplace discrimination, horizontal violence, and microaggressions.

## **Discussion**

Upon review of the wide variety of documents, it was evident that the ICDEP informs what dietetic programs in Canada must develop through curricula. Up until the present time, leadership has not been a competency area required in dietetic education programs, and the documents alone do not provide the whole picture. The documentary analysis highlighted transferrable skills that are often associated with leadership, which were elaborated on by dietetic educators.

### ***Developing Self-Leadership in Programs***

Educators talked about developing self-leadership in students through critical reflection and collaborative activities in a variety of courses, rather than through one specific course. These activities help students not only become self-aware of personal strengths and challenges, but also develop strategies to improve oneself or have a growth mindset. This is consistent with Thompson and Miller (2018) who write that self-leadership aligns two personal attributes: self-awareness and developmental motivation, whereby self-awareness is the ability to understand one's personal strengths and challenges combined with an eagerness to grow.

While self-leadership skills appeared to be taught in professional practice and communication type classes, these skills were also taught in clinical and management courses. This is a

prudent strategy for dietetic programs because students have a variety of opportunities and settings where they can learn and apply these skills. Interestingly, it has been argued that self-leading individuals are more productive regardless of their role (Birdi et al., 2008; Manz & Sims, 1991). The development of self-leading skills begins in the first year and this can be seen in the dietetic courses, where they introduce students to some of these skills in their first year, then gradually develop their capacity over the subsequent years. In addition, more recently, Dickson and Tholl (2014) advanced notions of leading outside of one's official title by "leading from where you are" (p. 283) or self-leadership, collaboration, and leading in a complex environment. As seen in the syllabi and focus group discussion, the data showed that students can learn and practice self-leadership skills in a variety of contexts, rather just associating these skills with one specific course or role (e.g., clinical).

### ***Further Leadership Development Through Extracurricular Activities***

Research suggests that the situation for students pursuing dietetics is especially competitive to secure a dietetic internship (Siswanto et al., 2015). To address this issue, the dietetic educators said some programs have integrated the internship into their curricula. Despite the shift to integrating internship into dietetic programs, students may still find applying to enter dietetic programs competitive. Students may use non-job-related experiences, such as participation in extracurricular activities during their studies to demonstrate knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). In the focus group, the educators discussed different ways students gained leadership outside of the learning experiences offered by the dietetic programs. Extracurricular activities, whether directly related to nutrition and food or not, may give students additional opportunities to practice many of the transferrable skills such as communication. Some students may also pursue leadership roles in these activities, such as holding a co-chair position.

Roulin and Bangerter (2013) found in their study with 197 students that students mainly engage in extracurricular activities for internal motives (e.g., passion). As students became closer to entering the labour market, students became more active in professionally related associations or volunteering activities and sought more leadership positions. Marinescu et al. (2017) also found that students acquired leadership skills through extracurricular activities, throughout the academic environment. Although participating in extracurricular activities has advantages to improve job prospects, it has been researched that students in highly competitive health science programs are also at risk for burnout when taking on these activities (Almalki et al., 2017).

### ***Role of Dietetic Educators - "Dietetic Educators Matter"***

An emergent theme was the role of the educator is important in informing, designing, and delivering the program. In dietetics, many dietetic educators are dietitians themselves, some of whom have taken advanced training in adult education. Like nursing education, dietetic education encompasses a variety of teaching roles such as clinical oversight, clinical practice, simulated, on-line, and didactic instruction, and doctoral projects/dissertations that all impact workload (Thompson & Miller, 2018). In addition to their teaching roles, educators play a critical role in shaping learners' professional identity and career path. Chen and colleagues (2017) write that educators have a role in nurturing learners' early passions teaching and focusing on identity formation and career development to provide a vision and path for them in the profession. "Dietetic educators matter" (Chloe, Associate Professor) yet despite the critical role educators have in shaping dietetic education, the focus group participants

reported systemic barriers including discrimination, horizontal violence, and microaggression. Some participants talked about how they have personally experienced power imbalance in the workplace which have resulted in inequitable and at times discriminatory outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

What appeared from the documentary analysis was evidence that some leadership-related skills associated with communication skills and professional practice are part of the curricula, although these are not explicitly linked to leadership development of trainees. To develop a better understanding of how these skills are taught and to obtain further insights, insights were gleaned from the four dietetic educators who participated in the focus group interview. Their collective responses provided much needed insight into how leadership-related skills are taught or experienced in different programs. It became apparent the role dietetic educators have in shaping how curricula is taught; however, educators are often faced with barriers that limit their ability to fully exercise their own self-leadership within the academic institutions. Taken together, the documentary analysis and focus group interview illustrate the current context of how leadership is taught in dietetic education.

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**Contact email:** [bhermosu@uottawa.ca](mailto:bhermosu@uottawa.ca)