

# Predicting DI Acceptance: The Role of Service Learning

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## Abstract

Statistics from the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND) reflect that from 2001 until 2009, an average of 66% of didactic program in dietetics (DPD) students successfully match to a dietetic internship (DI). However since 2007, the percent of students who successfully match to a DI has declined. According to the 2014 data, there were 5140 total applicants for 2,836 available positions. In that same year, there were 2491 matched and preselected applicants for a 51% nationwide match rate [1]. An increased emphasis on disease prevention, a growing and aging population, and public awareness of diet and disease implications point to an expected increase in the need for CDR-credentialed dietetics practitioners [2]. Previous studies indicate cumulative and sophomore grade point average (GPA) and work experience are predictive of acceptance into a Dietetic Internship [3,4]. This article aims to identify current predictors of success and strategies to improve student outcomes by surveying DI and DPD Directors and educators. The intent is to arm students with the information and experiences they need as DPD students to position themselves for success in their dietetics careers. Service learning experiences at the undergraduate level can potentially increase competitiveness in a dietetic internship match. The importance of service learning in relation to successful student outcomes will be discussed.

## Introduction

As the acceptance rate for admission into dietetic internships has declined, DPD educators and students have scrutinized DPD curriculum and traits of accepted applicants. To state the obvious, the number of students enrolled in and graduating from DPD programs continues to increase while the number of available dietetic internship spots has not increased accordingly. Based on the literature, grade point average (GPA), especially sophomore GPA, and math SAT scores are the academic criteria most predictive of dietetic internship acceptance. Other criteria of importance include letters of recommendation, work experience, and writing ability [3,4]. Characteristics desired by employers are identified in the literature as human and conceptual skills, writing skills, creative thinking, business skills, research skills, and desire for lifelong learning [4-7].

When qualified students successfully complete a DPD program but are not accepted into a DI, their options include entering the workforce with the Bachelor of Science in Nutrition or related field and/or graduate school. As a result previously unmatched students reapply for dietetic internships each year. This situation causes frustration for DPD students as well as for educators in DPD programs. Determining what DI Directors look for in successful DI applications is needed for successful DPD programs.

## Methods

In the fall of 2012, an Institutional Review Board approved survey (Survey Monkey) was administered using the Nutrition and Dietetics Educators and Preceptors (NDEP) email distribution list which contains ~600 professionals. One-hundred and thirty-four educators responded to the survey (22% response rate). The professionals who are part of NDEP include DI and DPD Directors and educators as well as facility preceptors for supervised practice experiences. Respondents were asked to use an ordinal (ranking) of most important to least important for each set of characteristics.

The 68 respondents who identified themselves as a DI Director were then asked to rank the importance of intern applicant characteristics in four areas: academics, experience, demographic or personal skills, and reference source. These four main areas and criteria for each area were chosen by the researcher based on the literature. Academic criteria included cumulative GPA, science GPA, GRE scores, SAT math scores, SAT verbal scores, and high school rank. Demographic or personal skills included creativity, oral and written communication, computer skills, and organization.

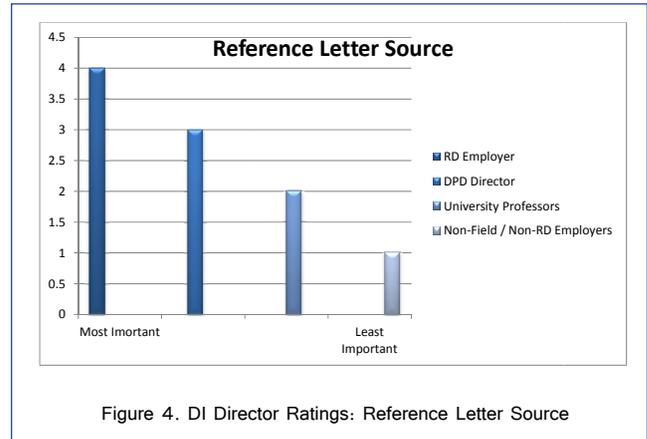
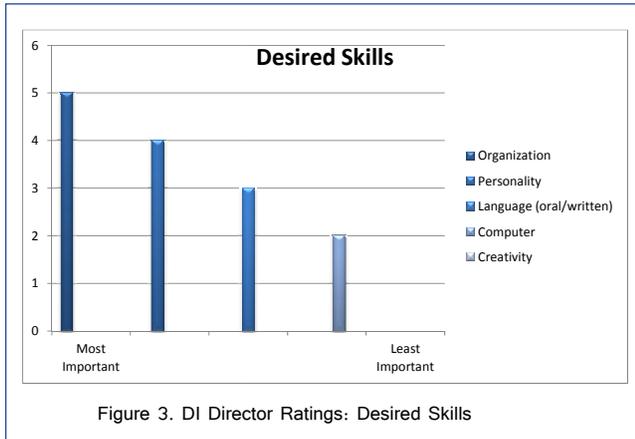
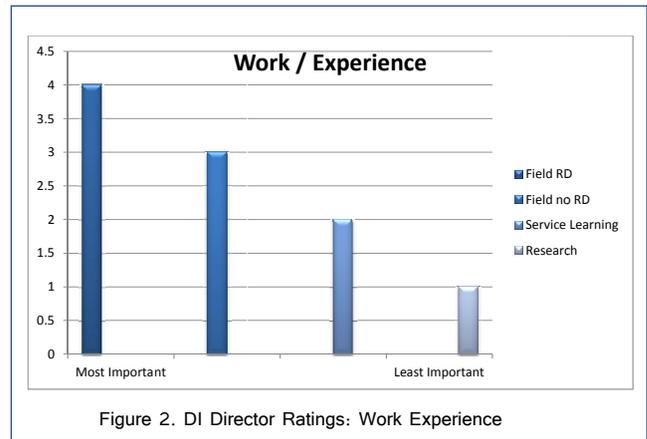
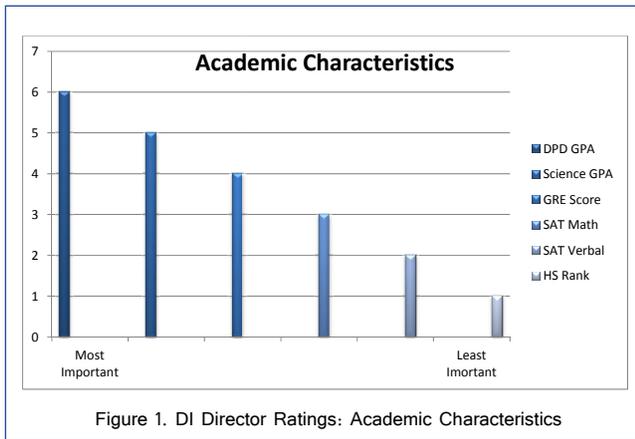
Experience criteria included field-related work experience with and without the supervision of a Registered Dietitian (RD), service learning, and research participation. Reference sources ranked include DPD Directors, professors, RD employers and non-RD employers. DI Directors were also given the opportunity to comment regarding what they see as the most important criteria for internship graduates to pass the registration exam on the first attempt and what they see as the most important criteria for acceptance into their particular internship program.

The 45 respondents who identified themselves as a DPD Director were then asked to rank the importance of DPD program characteristics including service learning, networking and employment opportunities, academic support resources, and participation in a student dietetics or related organization. These criteria were chosen by the researcher based on the standard application for supervised practice in dietetics.

## Results

The majority of respondents were DI Directors (n=68) or DPD Directors (n=45) and had been in their current positions less than five years (n=54). The remaining respondents were DPD professors (n=16) and DI professors (n=5).

When asked to evaluate and rank criteria from the four content categories (academic, work experience, desired skills, and recommendation letter source) in order of importance for acceptance into a dietetic internship DI Directors (see Figures 1-4) identified overall GPA, work experience with a Registered Dietitian (RD), organization, and letters of recommendation from RD employers. Didactic Program in Dietetics Directors and educators (see Figure 5) identified service learning as the most important criteria in an undergraduate didactic program.



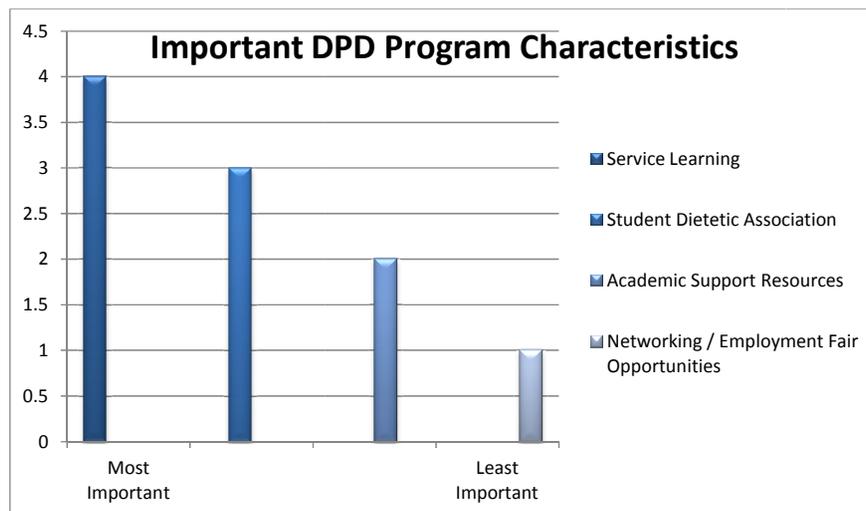


Figure 5. DPD Director / Educator Ratings: Important DPD Program Characteristics

When comparing the past literature with the current 2012 survey (see Table 1), we can determine that GPA, field-related work experience, and recommendation letters remain important criteria for acceptance into a dietetic internship. Additionally, experience working with a Registered Dietitian and development of organization skills are valuable for DPD students.

An important outcome for DPD and DI Directors is the RD exam pass rate. Dietetic Internship Directors were also asked to identify by open response the most predictive criteria for RD exam pass rate. Items identified by the 67 DI Directors who responded to this question are listed in Table 2.

1995 Literature Reviews (3-4)	Employer identified traits(4-7)	2012 (Current) Survey Results
GPA (overall, sophomore year, senior year)	Human and conceptual skills	Cumulative GPA
SAT math scores	Writing skills	Field work experience with RD
Letters of recommendation	Creative thinking	Organization
Paid work experience—hospital	Business skills (marketing, finance, management, personnel)	Recommendation letter from RD employer
Paid work experience—general	Research skills	
Writing ability	Desire for lifelong learning	

Table 1. Comparison of literature review and survey results

Criteria Identified	Number of Responses
GPA (specifically science and DPD GPA)	27
Test-taking ability	10
GRE	7
DI curriculum	7
Study skills / work ethic	6
First language English	4
Work experience	3
DPD program	2
Review course	1

Table 2. DI Director: Predictors of RD Exam Pass Rate

## Conclusion

Didactic Program in Dietetics Directors and educators are charged with meeting ACEND requirements. Prior to 2012, the ACEND standards for program outcomes specified that over a five year period of time, 60% of DPD students applied to supervised practice (dietetic internship) programs and that 80% of these applicants be accepted [8]. In essence, DPD programs were being held to a higher standard than the national average. In 2012, ACEND allowed DPD programs to set thresholds for student application and acceptance into Dietetic Internships [9].

The charge for DPD Directors is to create a didactic curriculum at the undergraduate level which meets ACEND requirements and prepares students for the dietetic internship when the reality is that approximately half of the students in the program will not be accepted into a dietetic internship. The goal is to develop a curriculum which will provide the academic knowledge base and the opportunity for skill development which will prepare students for the dietetic internship, employment, and/or graduate school. Academic counseling at the undergraduate level must be clear regarding the current rate of acceptance into dietetic internships nationwide as well as options for students who are not accepted.

## Service Learning-Strategy for Success

This study identified different student characteristics valued by DPD and DI Directors. While DPD Directors identified service learning as the top priority, it was number three for DI Directors. It is important to note that DPD and DI Directors are focused on related but different outcomes for accreditation. Both program types are required to report the percentage of students passing the Registration Examination which is both content and application based. DPD Directors are also tasked with tracking how many of their students apply to and are accepted into dietetic internships. Field-related work experience is one criteria dietetic internships use in the selection process. Service learning is one strategy to provide field-related experience while earning course credit.

Service learning provides students with the opportunity to use their knowledge and develop the skills needed for success in their future careers. Service learning is described as "mutually beneficial" as it provides a free service for program recipients while providing students with valuable hands-on experience [10-12]. Service learning can impact the criteria identified as important by DI Directors for acceptance into dietetic internships (experience), for RD exam pass rates (application), and by employers for desirable qualities in hiring. Retention of knowledge is enhanced by service learning through hands-on use of the content [10-14]. Getting undergraduate students out of the classroom and into their communities provides them the opportunity to put what they are learning in the classroom into practice. It can also be a valuable opportunity to demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach to health [15]. Embedding service-learning projects into the dietetics curriculum can expose undergraduate students to RDs in their communities and thus provide the student with field-related work experience with an RD and possible contacts for recommendation letters. Service learning experiences can provide students with opportunities to develop the desired characteristics of organization, communication, and creativity identified by DI Directors.

## Discussion

Didactic Program in Dietetics Directors and faculty must be aware of the national rate of acceptance of DPD students into dietetic internships. Didactic faculty must be able to help students position themselves for success by knowing what DI Directors and selection committees look for in applicants and communicating this to their students. Additionally, opportunities must be provided to students at the undergraduate level to support knowledge retention and skill development.

In order for service learning to be successful, it must be embedded in the didactic curriculum. This gives it a place in a course or courses, tied to learning objectives, and required for course completion. Service learning requires administrative and faculty support. Everyone involved must see the value of service learning and understand the scheduling requirements. It is also critical that faculty who wish to use service learning in their courses have relationships with RDs in their communities in order to facilitate service learning opportunities. The value of service learning in undergraduate dietetics programs must be communicated to DI Directors and employers. This can be accomplished through presentations at seminars and conferences, through published articles, and one-on-one interactions in local communities.

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