



Voices of Distress: The Emotional Peril of Not Attaining a Dietetic Internship in Ontario

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Obtaining dietetic licensure in Ontario requires completion of a Dietitians of Canada (DC) accredited four-year undergraduate degree in nutrition and an accredited post-graduate internship or combined Master's degree program. Given the scarcity of internship positions in Ontario, each year approximately two-thirds of the eligible applicants who apply do not receive a position (Brady, Hoang, Tzianetas, Buccino, Glynn, & Gingras, 2012). Anecdotally, not securing an internship position is known to be a particularly disconcerting experience that has significant consequences for individuals' personal, financial, and professional well being. However, no known interpretive research has yet explored students' experiences of being unsuccessful in applying for internship positions. Fifteen individuals who applied between 2005 and 2009 to an Ontario-based dietetic internship program, but were unsuccessful at least once, participated in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. Findings reveal that participants' experiences unfold successively in four phases that are characterized by increasingly heightened emotional peril: naïveté, competition, devastation, and frustration. The authors conclude that the current model of dietetic education and training in Ontario causes lasting distress to students and hinders the future growth and vitality of the dietetic profession. Further research is required to understand the impact of the current model on dietetic educators, internship coordinators, and preceptors as participants in the internship application process.

Introduction

Obtaining dietetic licensure in Ontario, Canada requires completion of a four-year accredited undergraduate degree in nutrition and a one-year, post-graduate internship program or a combined Master's degree program. Each year, Dietitians of Canada receives between 250-315 unique applications for the 82 post-graduate internship positions in Ontario which meant that on average only 34% of applicants were granted an internship placement (M. Wyatt, personal communication, November 17, 2009). Across Canada, many programs have adopted an integrated model in which students are streamed early on into an integrated program and a non-internship program of study (Ortman, Mann, & Fraser Arsenault, 2010; see Dietitians of Canada, 2012 at www.dietitians.ca/Career/Internships-Practicum-Programs/Internship-Routes.aspx for further details and illustrated comparison of the various integrated and post-graduate models of dietetic

education and training in Canada). In the integrated training models, practical placements are interspersed throughout students' academic studies, which has several advantages including reduced competition among students and enhanced professional socialization experiences (Lordly, 2002; Lordly and MacLellan, 2012). Perhaps more importantly, an integrated model could eliminate the current situation in Ontario in which many dietitian hopefuls are admitted to and complete the undergraduate portion of their training only to find that sufficient internship positions are not available. In phase one of this study it was found that unsuccessful applicants (those who have been denied an internship position at least once) meet, and in most cases exceed the minimum requirements for entry to a dietetic internship program (Brady et al., 2012). Graduates may apply for an intern position up to three times - once in each of the three years following their graduation. After the third unsuccessful attempt, applicants must complete additional undergraduate course work to

update their knowledge to be considered a fourth time. Nevertheless, many individuals who are unsuccessful with their first application do not reapply (Brady et al., 2012). For those that do wish to try again, the odds are still high that they will not get a position. Either way, there are consequences for students and the dietetic profession suffers losses of human potential as unsuccessful applicants take the specialized nutrition knowledge gained throughout their undergraduate education as well as other personal abilities, experiences, and attributes elsewhere (Brady et al., 2012).

The undergraduate degree is a key phase in the professionalization of those hoping to become dietitians (MacLellan, Lordly, & Gingras, 2011) during which applicants develop strong ties to the dietetic profession. Goldenberg and Iwasiw (1993, as quoted in MacLellan, Lordly, & Gingras, 2011) define professionalization as “a complex and interactive process by which the content of the professional role (skills, knowledge, behaviour) is learned and the values, attitudes, and goals integral to the profession and sense of occupational identity which are characteristic of a member of that profession are internalized” (p. 37). As undergraduate nutrition students, applicants also build relationships with dietitian mentors through various work and volunteer experiences. Not securing an internship position presents a rather abrupt and conclusive end (or interruption) to students’ professionalization experiences.

It is not surprising that anecdotally, not securing an internship position is known to be a disconcerting experience that has significant consequences for individuals’ personal, financial, and professional well being. However, no known qualitative research has told the stories of unsuccessful applicants. This is despite long-standing calls issued by dietetic educators and students for changes to the way that dietitians are educated and trained in Ontario. Moreover, the Task Force on Dietetic Education and Practical Training, which was assembled in 2010 to review and recommend changes to the current model of dietetic education and training in Ontario, sought consultation from a wide variety of stakeholders. There was however, no known consultation with applicants – those who have perhaps been most harmed by the continuance of the status quo. The Task Force report, which was released in June 2011 recognized the need to restructure existing dietetic education and training system. The full Task Force report is available on Dietitians of Canada’s website: [http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloadable-Content/Public/Task-](http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloadable-Content/Public/Task-Force-on-Dietetic-Education-and-Practical-Training.aspx)

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On another note, how decisions are made regarding which applicants are offered internship positions and which are not lacks transparency (Brady et al., 2012). The results of the initial phase of this project suggest that what we have come to call “the fit” between an internship applicant and the individual program is determined mainly in the interview stage of the application process. “The fit” describes interviewers’ assessment of an internship applicant’s suitability for a program based on a vague constellation of attributes other than a candidate’s determinable qualifications such as grade point average, work and volunteer experience, or education. The lack of clear and transparent guidelines for admission to internship programs leaves space for discrimination based on sex, race, body size, sexuality, and so on that may subconsciously or overtly impact interviewers’ assessments of applicants’ “fit” with an internship program. Understanding the impact that the current model of dietetic education and training in Ontario has on all stakeholders through research and inclusive consultation is crucial to changing the current dietetic education and training model.

The purpose of this study was to give voice to unsuccessful internship applicants. This paper presents results from the second phase of a mixed-methods project. Phase one of the project used quantitative methods to describe the population of those who applied to Ontario-based internship programs between 2005 and 2009, but were unsuccessful (Brady et al., 2012). Phase two illuminates the findings reported in phase one by asking: What is the experience of those who are unsuccessful at least once in securing an internship position in Ontario?

Methods

Participants were recruited through the online survey used in phase one, which invited respondents to participate in a one-on-one interview about their experience (for a detailed description of the phase one methods see Brady et al., 2012). Survey respondents interested in being interviewed were asked to provide their names and contact information or to contact the research team at an email address provided in the survey. Study participants were self-selected according to the criteria outlined in the recruitment email, which indicated they had applied to an Ontario-based internship program between 2005 and 2009 but were unsuccessful. Unsuccessful applicants were defined as those who applied to Ontario-based dietetic internship

programs (up to three programs per application year), but were not offered a position in the first round of their first application year. Those who received at least one offer in the first round of the first year in which they applied were excluded. Consent forms containing details of the project were sent to all interested survey respondents and interviews were scheduled upon return of a signed consent form.

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes on average and were audio-recorded via telephone. Four research assistants conducted all the interviews using the same semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide asked participants about their experiences of undergraduate education leading up to internship application, the internship application process, not getting an internship, and what changes they would make to the application and selection process. The interviews were analyzed using a voice-centered relational method (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). Each university's respective Research Ethics Board approved this research.

Results and Discussion

All interview participants (n=15) had submitted an unsuccessful application to an Ontario-based internship program between 2005 and 2009. The majority of participants were between 20 and 30 years old with one participant each between the ages of 31-40, 41-50, and 51-60. About half of the participants had earned a prior degree. Findings reveal that participants' experiences successively unfold in four phases that are characterized by increasingly heightened emotional peril: *naïveté, competition, devastation, and frustration.*

Naïveté

This stage comprises the period just prior to students' entry into a nutrition program and their first and, for some, their second year. During this stage, participants said they wanted to become dietitians, but that they were generally unaware about the work that dietitians do and the limited availability of internship positions. For example, Paula commented, *"I was pretty naïve when I went into the program. Other than my little experience with the dietitian in the factory, I really didn't even know what a dietitian was"*. Tasleen also expressed naïveté about the possibility of not getting an internship position:

Something I didn't know, and I think would have been more helpful had I known from the outset, which is how limited the positions were for internships. I just assumed that once you start your nutrition degree

that's where everyone is streamed and because I just knew from the outset that's what I wanted to do...I wanted to be a dietitian.

At this point competition for internships was not a part of most participants' experience. Rather, once participants became aware that internship was required to become a dietitian, it was simply seen as the natural next step after graduation from their undergraduate programs.

Competition

By their senior undergraduate years, participants noted being aware of the likely possibility that they would not receive an internship position. This realization was accompanied by a heightened sense of competition, and it amplified participants' feelings of stress and pressure to excel in their academic and extracurricular activities. Competition among peers arose as students vied for the marks and experiences that would set them apart from their peers (Atkins & Gingras, 2009). Kaitlyn explained *"because there are only are so many internship spots...everyone was fighting for that volunteer spot, everyone was fighting for that something that kind of made them stand out from everyone else"*. This extends Lordly and MacLellan's (2008) findings that competition arises mainly at the time when students are submitting internship applications.

Some participants felt that the pressure to volunteer and compete for volunteer positions limited the time and focus they had available for course work and had a negative impact on their learning. Cali described her experience:

Especially in 3rd and 4th year I couldn't just focus on my school because I knew that I had to get an internship and I need to do extra volunteer work and I need to be a member of so many associations and groups. And so I felt like overworked and overburdened kind of thing because we had the stress of having to get an internship...you're like oh God I have to volunteer at this organization I have to volunteer at that organization because it's going to look good on my resume you know. You're always stressing. You can't even relax and enjoy or even sort of go through the whole process of you know doing your university undergrad and doing the internship...everyone was always competing with each other.

Although participants did not mention the impact that this had on their personal lives, it is likely that students are regularly required to compromise their personal

and family lives given the time commitment involved in building a competitive internship application.

Competition became particularly acute in participants' final undergraduate year during the internship application process. Participants' revealed that the competition bred secrecy, silence, and suspicion among peers. Cali indicated that not talking about internship with peers was an "unwritten rule...you kind of knew, do not talk about it unless they talked to you about it, kind of thing, it was never said". She elaborated:

Everyone was kind of secretive. It's so competitive and everyone was like didn't want you to know what's on their application...people didn't really talk about it too much because it was kind of like a personal thing considering that you're competing for like the same spot kind of thing so they wouldn't share their like information of you know where they were applying or any tips. They wouldn't be speaking of any tips on what they did in their application.

Similarly, Cynthia commented, "It was very competitive, not very supportive... you're on your own kind of environment...People did not want to share, didn't even talk about their marks, or how they did, nothing. Like there was no conversation about it, no students talked about it". The secrecy engendered silence about the emotional impact of the process:

There was a feeling that students were keeping secrets about where you're applying even where you've gotten an interview or where you've gotten in... You didn't want to go around bragging about it either unnecessarily because you could make someone burst into tears. (Paula)

Some noted that the competition also triggered suspicion of peers' friendship: "I tried to avoid talking to people in my program because when you talk to them you're not actually talking to them. They're trying to get like something out of you like, 'oh where did you apply?'" (Kerry)

Ultimately, the 'culture of competition' negatively impacted relationships among peers. Jessica said that peers "distanced themselves" to avoid sharing their experiences. Additionally, Erin explained: "...it was a very very difficult situation because you're with your friends, you want to help them, you would like them to help you but you're all competing against each other. So you want them to succeed, but you want to succeed as well so you're in a very very difficult situation because if you help them to succeed you might not be succeeding".

The degree of competition that characterizes the learning environment in which future dietitians are socialized more than likely has a long-lasting negative impact on practitioners and the culture of the dietetic profession. It is important that future research explore how these experiences shape practitioners' dietitian identities, and relationships with clients and colleagues, as well as the culture of the dietetic profession (MacLellan, Lordly, & Gingras, 2011).

Devastation

The penultimate stage of the participants' emotional turmoil occurred as interview and internship offers were being announced. Like most other participants, Aylisha simply said, "I was devastated". Participants' feelings of devastation were augmented by perplexity, exasperation, rejection, self-doubt, and isolation. Many participants felt they had done "everything right" and exasperated, questioned "what do I need to do to become a dietitian?" Cathy shared, "I think [not getting an internship] might have been my worst experience through my schooling. It was really really rough because I was an 'A' student but I really didn't understand what I was doing wrong, why I didn't get a position". Likewise, Cynthia intimated, "It makes no sense because I've done everything I was supposed to and I have a previous degree and I thought it shows how freaking serious [I was] with what I was doing".

Not receiving an internship position despite their efforts made participants feel rejected and took a toll on their self-esteem and self-confidence. Kaitlyn said, "you feel like you let yourself down, you let everyone else down". Consequently, participants doubted their ability to succeed in the future. As Kerry explained, "It definitely makes you feel, lowers your self-confidence and your self-esteem and you kind of doubt your ability to be a good student and to be in that field". Erin added:

I don't know what is behind their decision-making but it was, from this end extremely extremely difficult to deal with. It was probably one of the hardest things mentally and emotionally I had to do. I am not surprised that people just said 'you know what? I'm not doing this anymore'; that people dropped out before they even try again because you feel like a failure constantly...I think it definitely made me feel like I wasn't smart enough, I wasn't good enough, I didn't learn enough, I didn't do enough experience for them.

Erin's comment also indicates a positioning of "us" (internship applicants) and "them" (internship coordinators and dietitians) which provides insight into how power operates among dietitian hopefuls and those in a position to evaluate if they "fit" or not (Good, Poultney, Brady, and Gingras, submitted for review). Erin's comment suggests that those hoping to secure an internship feel exasperated by the seeming endlessness to the amount of volunteering or time spent studying that they could do to improve their internship applications. This supports Lordly and MacLellan's (2012) finding that competition for internships affixes students' attention to becoming interns to the detriment of their becoming professional practitioners and the future colleagues to those who would decide if they will secure an internship or not.

A similar us/them dynamic was created among successful and unsuccessful applicants. Participants described feeling isolated from those who had secured internship positions. Cathy commented, "At school it was difficult because most of my friends got a position and to a certain degree there was some sort of hierarchy that was built... they were ahead of me and I was still behind". Jessica also said, "I wasn't very comfortable chatting with them about the internship process...I was happy for them genuinely, but I didn't really want to hear about their experiences and how excited they were because I wasn't going to be looking forward to that".

Frustration

The final stage of their experience, which occurred after intern selections were announced, is characterized by participants' feelings of frustration. Participants attributed their frustration to various aspects of the application and selection process as well as uncertainty about their future career steps.

Participants were frustrated by the intern selection process, which they described as "random", the "luck of the draw", and like a "lottery" or a "game". Tasleen explained, "It was a bit frustrating because on one hand I did feel that I was disappointed. What more could I have done? On the other hand, I guess it truly is the luck of the draw and there was nothing else I could do about it". The feelings of helplessness that these comments suggest are the consequence of their experiences may mean that unsuccessful applicants are less likely to reapply or may feel obliged to take on more volunteer work. Participants' frustration also arose from what they felt was feedback from internship coordinators on their application and interviews that was "unhelpful" and

"not constructive". For example, Erin recounted her experience of receiving feedback:

In one [internship program] I applied to last year and again this year and they had said in my first time I needed to answer the question more thoroughly. So this time I had an interview with them they asked me the exact same questions they did the year before. I answered them thoroughly. I thought I did a fantastic job. I wrote them a thank you letter and I got response back saying how wonderful it was to meet me, obviously I know a lot about what I'm talking about. Well, when I didn't get a spot I contacted them for feedback and she said, 'well you were thorough but you were almost too thorough so you need to learn to be a little bit more concise'.

Condescending feedback such as this creates a dysfunctional power dynamic wherein unsuccessful internship applicants are expected to beseech those in positions of power for some insight into what more they must do to be worthy of an internship position. What is more, Erin's experience underscores the seeming arbitrariness of how and why applicants are awarded internship positions. However, it is perilous to presume that interns are chosen at random. Doing so serves to keep hidden how applicants' "fit" with a program is evaluated and prevents dietetic educators from being held accountable for upholding the process that reinforces systematic emotional turmoil among applicants. The consequences of the lack of transparency and accountability are wide reaching. For individual applicants, on one hand the lack of transparency results in feelings of frustration as we have elucidated here. Even more concerning is that this may also mean that applicants are victimized by discrimination. For the profession, the opportunity for discrimination to manifest due to the lack of transparency and accountability may in part account for limited diversity within the profession and this has serious consequences for its ability to provide effective, fair, and compassionate nutrition support to Canada's diverse population.

Finding employment in the short-term was another source of frustration for participants. For those planning on reapplying, finding a job in the interim was a priority, but also very challenging. In addition to their financial need, participants felt it necessary to find nutrition-related work that might enhance their applications and increase their chances of securing an internship position the following year. However, participants experienced challenges as non-dietitian nutrition professionals.

Samantha explained:

I was unemployed for nine months because anything I applied for, they wanted someone with an RD behind their name. I actually had an interview once, everything was arranged, the morning of the interview I received a phone call at 8 o'clock in the morning someone from the company asking specifically are you an RD. I said no and I never said that I was in my cover letter or resume that I had submitted. The guy said to me, sorry we only want to hire RD's. I am going to cancel the interview and this was for a sales position with a pharmaceutical company. I applaud the profession for making their case to the government and being recognized as a professional body but because I am not allowed, I was blocked from the heart of that professional group. It really hurts.

Additionally, participants reported that potential employers were hesitant to hire them because they might leave within a year should they secure an internship upon reapplying.

Others were equally frustrated with what they felt was a lack of career and emotional support offered by their respective undergraduate programs. Amy explained, *"I felt a lot of 'Now what? Now what do I do?' I felt cut loose.... You're on your own now. There was no real help or guidance. What do I do in the meantime? I have just been rejected... How do I mentally deal with this?"* Participants felt that their undergraduate programs focused on clinical dietetics and did not provide adequate information about alternative career options. Paula explained:

I basically cried for two weeks. I thought my life was over because I didn't know what I would do after, right? You set yourself up after school: this is the next step, this is the next step and then you don't get it and I didn't even get an opportunity for it and so you just feel completely rejected. And kind of like now what am I supposed to do, what could you do with this degree and I felt I wasn't told what you even do with the degree afterwards. Like I said you didn't get too much information the year I was in school.

Erin contrasted the career support offered by her undergraduate department with preparing internship applications to the support made available to unsuccessful applicants after the selections were announced: *"I felt [my university] did a fantastic job in giving information and preparing applications, but what happened after when people weren't selected or what to do then? That, not so much"*. Participants' comments also revealed

that emotional support was also lacking. Cynthia described feeling "excited" about the opportunity to participate in this study because as she said, *"nobody ever asked, 'How did that make you feel?'"* Undergraduate nutrition programs may think to provide students with more information about the difficulty of securing an internship position and/or other career options far in advance of students applying for internships. While a formal process by which students may provide feedback to the program may help them work through their frustration, this would do nothing to change the reason why so few graduates are able to secure internship positions nor would this reduce the competitive atmosphere in which they are expected to learn and develop their dietitian identities.

This study supports Lordly and MacLellan's (2008) findings that frustration emerges due to a perceived lack of career advising available to those who do not receive an internship position. Regardless of their frustration with the process, the majority of the participants had reapplied or had intentions to reapply for an internship position. Although their feelings about the internship application and selection process had changed significantly, participants' feelings about the profession did not change. All still revered the profession and wished to become a dietitian despite their undergraduate experience and negative views of the internship application and selection process.

Regrettably, the new model for dietetic education and training that was developed and proposed by the Task Force was not funded by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (MOHLTC) because "the model of dietetic education proposed by the Task Force [added] significant elements and layers to the current framework and [did] so at significant cost to the province. Further, the model [did] not noticeably shorten the overall length of the program or relieve the pressure on existing clinical placements (personal communication, Jeff Goodyear, September 2012). However, it is worth considering the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed model to highlight future possibilities. The benefits of the Task Force's recommended model are that all students selected for entry into the "integrated model" would be eligible to write the Canadian Dietetic Registration Exam (CDRE), students would be able to defer education related loan payments until the end of the practicum placement, and less competition among students selected for entry could enhance collegial relationships and promote collaborative learning.

However, the positions held by internship coordinators that currently manage clinical hospital-based internship programs in Ontario would be eliminated. This may ultimately decrease the number and variety of internship placement opportunities available, as hospitals without funding for an internship coordinator position may become less willing to support placement opportunities for interns. In addition, undergraduate students would be required to complete a written “standardized competency assessment tool” in their fourth year of undergraduate study at approximately the point at which students now apply for internship positions to assess and rank student readiness to begin an internship (Dietitians of Canada, 2011, p. 11). A similar entry point for writing the standardized assessment as applying for internship does nothing to correct another problem with the current model that is caused by the timing (and the stress) of internship selection. At present, students must have nearly completed the first phase their education (undergraduate degree) before they are told if they will be permitted to complete the second phase of their training (internship). Moreover, another concern is that standardized testing may bring about a test-driven learning environment so that the current culture of competition would be reinforced by an equally as harmful culture of standardized testing. Not only is this likely to discourage students from learning beyond what is expected to be on the test, but it maligns specific types of non-testable knowledge and abilities that are important to dietetic practice such as extending respect, compassion, and empathy to others.

Overall, these results indicate that the current internship application and selection process in Ontario is causing distress to the two-thirds of those who apply but are unsuccessful in obtaining an internship each year. Given the “culture of competition” that characterized participants’ senior undergraduate years, it is likely also distressing to their successful peers. Since students carry their learning and experiences gained during their education and training with them as they enter practice (Gingras, 2009) it is likely also having a deleterious impact on the culture of the dietetic profession and may hinder its future growth and vitality.

Based on these results, the authors propose several short- and long-term action points for dietetic educators, researchers, and leaders to ease the emotional consequences of the current internship application and selection process. In the short-term:

- Inform potential and incoming undergraduate nutrition students well in advance about the availability of and demand for internship positions in Ontario using actual numbers from previous years’ acceptance rates via all possible communication channels including printed and online recruitment materials, early career advising, in-class and extracurricular lectures and information sessions;
- Implement in-class career advising opportunities to inform students of career options that do not require them to attain licensure. In-class opportunities are crucial to prevent the vulnerability that might be associated with attending ad-hoc workshops that stigmatize students who are perceived to be considering alternative routes and thus less committed to seeking an internship;
- Offer support for unsuccessful and successful internship applicants after internship selections are announced such as career counselling and emotional support.

In the long-term, the current education and training model in Ontario requires fundamental and significant change, but at the same time these changes must duly respect the funding objectives of the MOHLTC. Despite what appears to be a colossal effort over many years and now decades, this change has not materialized. The authors question whether those who are toiling for change are adequate for the task. As Judith Rodriguez, former Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics President (2010), has said,

“Someone must champion change. In an environment where admittance to internships has become prohibitively competitive, we must not lose sight of our mission to make the field accessible and relevant to those most in need of our services” (p. 1793).

Additionally, in a yet unpublished manuscript, Dr. Jill White states,

“It is up to those of us who have already crossed over to reach back and make a way. The alternative is to replace those who insist upon maintaining the status quo with a new, more representative leadership.”

Change is necessary not simply to make the process more equitable, but to create learning and practice environments in which practitioners, educators, and the profession itself may flourish. We propose the following changes as a starting point for further dialogue to imagine a better future for dietitian training in Ontario:

- Equalize the number of students admitted to a dietetic stream of the undergraduate nutrition programs and the number of internship placements available so that graduates would be guaranteed the opportunity to qualify to write the CDRE. Initiate a non-dietetics stream such as health studies, food studies, or nutritional science where much larger enrolments will offset lower class sizes in the dietetic stream and likely enhance departmental resources given the popularity of such programs elsewhere;
- Increase and diversify the practical training placements opportunities available through prior learning assessment and collaborative partnerships with dietitians working in various practice areas outside of traditional teaching hospital facilities;
- Create explicit and universal minimum criteria for admission to internship programs including grade point average, total hours of volunteer or work experience in the various practice settings (ie. community, clinical, administrative, research), and any other skills, attributes, or experiences required. A maximum criteria on hours spent volunteering would likely prevent student over-engagement and reduce the over-reliance on students for tedious dietetic labour such as filing;
- Establish transparency and accountability in the internship selection process by making known how and why internship applicants are chosen and which are not. Involve hospital human resource departments in providing this information to insure protection of privacy and promote freedom of information;
- Work to secure adequate financial support for those completing dietetic internships in Ontario. This must include options for those with student loans to defer interest accrual and payment until a reasonable time after completion of the internship program given the financial stress on interns during their year of unpaid training.

Equalizing the number of entrants to undergraduate nutrition programs and the number of practical training opportunities presents several advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages of such a scheme include reduced pressure on undergraduate students to maximize their volunteer hours which would leave more time for students to engage with their learning as well as to balance their studies with time needed for their personal and family lives. Moreover, expectations about the requirements for success would be clear from the

outset of the program and would reduce the competition among peers that currently arises as students vie for too few internship positions. Finally, it could be possible to allow additional entrants to undergraduate nutrition programs beyond the number of students that could be accommodated by internship training opportunities by allowing these individuals to qualify for dietetic licensure upon completing further education such as through a Master's program. The authors recognize that there are possible negative consequences related to "credential creep" that have already occurred in other health care professions such as speech and language pathology or social work where a Master's degree is now required for entry to practice in a clinical setting. We are not suggesting that a Master's degree should be required to be eligible to write the CDRE or to practice entry-level dietetics in any setting. Rather, we are suggesting that academic institutions benefit financially and in other ways from the effects of credential creep which is having an enormous impact on the education, training, and practice of various health professions in Canada.

Future Studies

Further research is needed to elucidate the findings reported here and to explore additional areas of concern not included in this study. For example, future studies are needed to describe the population of students that secure an internship with their first application attempt (Siswanto, Brady, Alvarenga, Magder, Riesel, Qureshi, & Gingras, submitted for review) to draw comparisons to the population of unsuccessful applicants described here. In addition, it is crucial that research cast light on the long-term impact that the culture of competition has on practitioners and the culture of the dietetic profession. Research with current practitioners may help to uncover if and how the culture of competition plays out in their work experiences. This is important to expanding work that has already be started on dietitian burnout (Gingras, De Jonge, & Purdy, 2010). Moreover, research on the future job roles of graduates who were unable to secure an internship position might help to improve career counselling and transition services that could be offered by the university programs.

Conclusion

By exploring the unheard voices of unsuccessful internship applicants, this study found that qualified food and nutrition students who do not receive an internship are negatively impacted through the internship application and intern selection process. Those who

oversee the internship selection process and those who fund the process are urged to consider these findings as they implement and/or develop policies that could inform this process in order to promote the growth and vitality of dietetic profession. As well, these decision-makers should work towards minimizing the negative impact of the competition during undergraduate studies caused by the scarcity of internship positions.

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