

Addressing Challenges of COVID-19 for Virtual College Nutrition Courses with Practicum Components

B. Michelle Harris

University of the District of Columbia, (USA)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.135.3>

ABSTRACT

A combination of a review of the literature and a survey of practices by fellow Nutrition and Dietetics Program faculty at the University of the District of Columbia were conducted to discover ways to maintain student engagement in practicum courses required for a dynamic undergraduate Didactic Program in Dietetics. This reviewer found through a comprehensive examination of the literature, along with a survey of her program colleagues, that flexibility and planning provide the opportunity for faculty to improve lecture and practicum courses during a pandemic. Emphasis on a high level of engagement enabled students to maintain their ability to apply the theory covered in their nutrition courses to practical problems. This approach will prepare students to enter post-graduate supervised practice and entry into careers as registered dietitians and licensed nutritionists with the confidence and skills that they need to succeed.

Keywords: nutrition, dietetics, practicum courses, pandemic

1 Introduction

The Nutrition and Dietetics Program of the University of the District of Columbia is the only Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) located in Washington, D.C. There is a diverse student population. Students run the gamut of age, national origin, sex and gender identity, physical and cognitive abilities, age, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The success of the UDC Nutrition and Dietetics Program rests heavily on the ability to provide students with practical experiences whereby they may apply the theoretical concepts introduced in lecture courses. Practicum courses introduce students to “real-world” practice and experiences. Practicum courses awaken in students a spark of excitement for endless possibilities in their careers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted higher education, beginning in March 2020, and continuing more than a year later. Not only have students, faculty, and other staff of colleges and universities experienced losses in terms of health and life, but many individuals have lost their jobs, their homes, and their ability to continue with their education. Across the United States, colleges and universities have been impacted differently. A great deal of the disparities may be based on the demographics of the communities that are served by the various colleges and universities.

At UDC, some students and their family members have contracted COVID-19. A few have lost family members to this deadly virus. More students and their families are experiencing food insecurity. Students who are parents have found themselves doubling as teachers and tutors.



© 2022 Copyright held by the author(s). Published by AIJR Publisher in the "Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Faculty Senate Research Conference: Higher Education During Pandemics" February 05, 2021. Organized by the University of the District of Columbia, USA.

Proceedings DOI: [10.21467/proceedings.135](https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.135); Series: AIJR Proceedings; ISSN: 2582-3922; ISBN: 978-81-957605-0-3

Despite losses and other challenges, students and faculty members have endured and even thrived.

An issue that must be addressed is how faculty who teach courses with laboratory or practicum components can assure that their students are provided the opportunity to quality experiential learning. Students enrolled in the Didactic Program in Dietetics at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) before COVID-19 had myriad exposures to provide, under the supervision of community-based nutrition professionals and land-grant staff, nutrition education, and food service to the public. Students would visit public and public charter schools, Senior Wellness Centers and congregate meal programs for senior citizens, and the WIC Program (Women, Infants, and Children). The nutrition faculty of UDC were forced to make significant changes to their practicum courses to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The experiences that faculty within and outside of UDC in adjusting to the COVID-19 pandemic will inform others across the nation on how to assure that students can acquire the skills they need to become successful nutritionists and dietitians, even with the absence of or with a minimum of opportunities to engage in face-to-face interactions for their practicum courses.

2 Methodology

This literature review includes peer-reviewed journals and dissertations that were published in 2020. In addition, data were solicited from faculty who instructed students between January 2020 and January 2021.

3 Results

The literature review included peer-reviewed journals and professional reports that were published in 2020. The article by Bevins and associates (2020) examined how higher education in the United States must plan for an uncertain future. Harper (2020) discussed how racial equity is implicated in the reopening of college and university campuses in the era of COVID-19. Louis-Jean and associates (2020) looked at the relationship between COVID-19 and racial disparities. O'Keefe and associates (2020) addressed the delivery of high-quality online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Food insecurity in the face of COVID-19 was addressed by Owens and associates (2020).

Some of the adjustments that faculty members of the Nutrition and Dietetics Program made were to first master features that are available in virtual meetings. Faculty learned to use interactive features of the online learning platform supported by the university. Special efforts were made to engage students and to require them to contribute to discussions regularly. Students who faced challenges with technology in terms of audio and video could still contribute by typing their responses for others to read silently or out loud.

One professor of the Nutrition and Dietetics Program reported that she encouraged students to participate in scavenger hunts. She regularly had students engage in "reflective discussions." She reported that she directed students to increase the usage of telephones and to send in photographs. She increased the amount of group work for students to stimulate interactions among them.

For the practicum component of her course, she had students conduct virtual individual site observations. This instructor increased the number of case studies that students were required to complete and the frequency of self-assessments they had to submit. She assigned an increased number of videos that the class reviewed and had students take turns leading discussions.

A second instructor stated that she reduced the number of hours required for field work in the practicum component of her course. She stated, "I had to rethink and reinvent the way I planned in-class activities." She utilized break-out sessions that were available on the UDC-sanctioned meeting application. She also rewrote objectives for the seminar course she taught "since virtual data collections were not feasible within the time limit of the course."

Some faculty members in the Nutrition and Dietetics Program took advantage of social media to spotlight student achievement for laboratory and practicum courses. One instructor used social media to engage students in lab activities that they could conduct from their homes. Instagram was used for students to share with the instructor and with their classmates the experiments they completed in their homes, including food preparation. Students also shared what they learned about interpreting food labels. Other faculty members were invited to observe the accomplishments that students achieved.

The author simulated a field experience practicum by taking on the role of training students to work as entry-level WIC Program employees. Students individually or as a class watched videos developed by various state agency WIC Programs that included role-playing. There were in-depth discussions after some of the videos. For others, students reflected on what they viewed, including what they learned and how they felt. Breakout sessions were used for students to develop skills to facilitate group activities.

Students were also exposed to the history of federal programs and laws and policies that impact these programs. It is expected that students who experienced this virtual practicum during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic can begin their careers in a WIC program or other community-based programs with the confidence that they can navigate policies and practices that would enable them to effectively serve program participants and the community.

4 Conclusion

This review reveals that with planning and flexibility, faculty can successfully pivot from face-to-face practicum courses to virtual practicum courses, limiting the impact of a pandemic on experiential learning for students in a Nutrition and Dietetics program. This is in line with what has been found at other institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

There have been many challenges encountered by our students. Some have contracted COVID-19. Many have lost family members to this deadly virus. Students and members of their families have lost jobs and housing. More are experiencing food insecurity. Students who are parents have found themselves doubling as teachers and tutors. Despite losses and other challenges, students and faculty members have endured and even thrived. The reader is encouraged to read the articles cited by the author. They contain useful references.

5 Declarations

5.1 Acknowledgments

The author thanks Raeleena Collington, Amy Schweitzer, Tia Jeffery, and Charmaine Jones, instructors of the University of the District of Columbia Nutrition and Dietetics Program courses, for sharing their experiences with adjusting their approaches to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2 Competing Interests

The author certifies that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

5.3 Publisher's Note

AJIR remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

References

- Bevins, F., Bryant, J., Krishnan, C., & Law, J. (2020). Coronavirus: How should US higher education plan for an uncertain future. *McKinsey*. Recuperado el, 22.
- Harper, S. R. (2020). COVID-19 and the racial equity implications of reopening college and university campuses. *American Journal of Education*, 127(1), 153-162.
- Jackson-Nevels B., Davis-Wagner D. Livingston V., Neely-Goodwin S. (2020) Navigating Through the Pandemic at Historically Black College University: Challenges and Opportunities. *International Journal of Social Policy and Education*, 2(5).
- Louis-Jean, J., Cenat, K., Njoku, C. V., Angelo, J., & Sanon, D. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) and racial disparities: a perspective analysis. *Journal of racial and ethnic health disparities*, 7(6), 1039-1045.
- O'Keefe, L., Rafferty, J., Gunder, A., & Vignare, K. (2020). Delivering High-Quality Instruction Online in Response to COVID-19: Faculty Playbook. *Online Learning Consortium*.
- Owens, M. R., Brito-Silva, F., Kirkland, T., Moore, C. E., Davis, K. E., Patterson, M. A., ... & Tucker, W. J. (2020). Prevalence and social determinants of food insecurity among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nutrients*, 12(9), 2515.
- Ray, A. (2021). Teaching in Times of Crisis: Covid-19 and Classroom Pedagogy. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(1), 172-173.