

Dietetic Internships: Improving Your Match Chance

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With less than 50% of students securing a dietetic internship, it can be one of the largest obstacles to becoming a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN)¹. Becoming an RDN currently requires the completion of a bachelor's degree, which will change to a master's degree requirement in 2024, along with an ACEND-accredited dietetics program, either a Coordinated Program in Dietetics (CP) or a Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) plus a Dietetic Internship (DI).

A CP combines the required coursework with a minimum of 1,200 supervised practice hours. Upon completion of the CP, graduates are eligible to sit for the national registration examination, administered by the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) to receive the RDN credential. However, there are fewer numbers of CPs and the programs tend to accept fewer numbers of students than a DPD, which means a large number of students opt for completing a DPD and then applying for a DI. Most DIs are anywhere from 8-24 months in length and participate in a computer-matching process, called the Dietetic Internship Centralized Application System (DICAS). Programs can participate in the spring and/or fall matching process. Reviewing internships and their requirements is an important component of getting a DI match.

Finding the Right Internship

Applying for DIs is stressful, but planning ahead can help reduce much of the worry. Cost, location, and applicant requirements are some of the many factors that come into play when choosing programs to which you will apply. Each internship ranks experience differently, so find the program where your application is competitive.

Cost and Location

Cost and location are important aspects of a DI, with two things to consider: many programs advise students not to work, and programs have upfront costs. You must also factor in moving and living costs as well, so do not apply to DIs in locations where you cannot afford to move to and live. Applying to internships where you can stay with family is an option and can help subsidize the cost of living. To pay for the internship, itself many students ask family for loans, save money, and/or take out personal loans. Another option is focusing on programs offering master's credits or degrees because the intern can be eligible for financial aid and student loans. There are seven V.A. Hospital internships which offer stipends. For those working at WIC, you can apply to a WIC internship where you can work part-time and complete the supervised practice hours. Each DI costs money to apply as well, so the more DIs you apply to, the higher your fee will be. Applying to numerous internships does not increase the odds of matching to one¹. Reading through the internship's goals and what they look for in applicants is extremely helpful in keeping your application fees down, and increasing your chances of matching.

GPA

Working and volunteering show responsibility and community engagement, but grades still matter. Internship programs have GPA minimums which can include overall GPA, science GPA, and/or DPD GPA. Proactively finding these requirements will ensure you do not waste time. Many programs will not look at applications that do not meet their requirements. Retaking a class or emailing the director about your situation can be helpful if you do not meet the minimum criteria but still want to apply. Internships offering master's degrees or credits typically require Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) scores. People typically dedicate one month to studying for the GRE and the cost is around \$200².

Another important resource when considering your grades is the Applicant's Guide to Supervised Practice. It is a large pdf file, updated every year, detailing the majority of DIs. Each internship is broken down illustrating the number of applicants they receive, the average GPA of interns, how they rank GPA work experience, volunteer, experience and much more. Looking over this document can help you gauge if you would be a competitive applicant for the internship for which you wish to apply.

Resume

Look at your resume. What themes do you see? Maybe you have volunteered at many places and versatility and flexibility are one of your strengths. Applying to an internship that has many rotation sites could suit your experience. Maybe your resume has many events you have organized and illustrates leadership. Applying to internships with a higher intern to preceptor ratio could work well, because you may not need extra guidance. Reading through an internship's website is critical for finding the right program. The goals of the intern aligning with the goals of the DI is one of the most important aspects when applying. DIs want to help students reach their goals, so make sure what you are looking for is something they can give. If you have time, find the places you want to apply and then tailor your experience to the program. This will help you stand out as an applicant, and also help you develop the skills you will need to do well at that specific internship.

Resources

There are plentiful resources available to strengthen your application. Becoming an Academy member shows your dedication to the profession and makes you eligible to sign up for an eMentor. Local professional dietetic groups and associations offer monthly events where you can network and learn about current issues in the field. All Access Internships (AAI) has a free Facebook page where students and interns can ask questions and share resources. AAI also has professional services for students to increase their chances of getting matched. Faculty, your DPD program director, and student dietetic groups on campus can be invaluable resources for helping you strengthen weak areas in your resume and finding local opportunities.

If You Didn't Get Matched

Even in the worst case scenario, you don't match, there are many options still available. There are second round matches, Individualized Supervised Practice Pathways (ISPP), fall match, and you are eligible to sit for the dietetic technician registered (DTR) exam. Many people who do

not match take a year to work and gain more experience. There are ways to use your bachelor's degree in dietetics to save money and gain experience for the next match date.

Resources

1. Sherry AR. Education: The dearth of dietetics internships. *Today's Dietitian*. 2015;17(3):18. <https://www.todaysdietitian.com/newarchives/031115p18.shtml>
2. Test Centers and Dates. ETS. https://www.ets.org/gre/revise/_general/register/centers_dates/. Accessed November 25, 2018.