

Licensure 101

What it is, why we need it and how students can get involved

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What is licensure?

Licensure broadly refers to the legislation in each individual state that allows certain professionals, such as dietitians, to practice. It helps define the profession's scope of practice and ensures that any individual practicing within a profession has the required education and practical experience, as well as successfully passed the required examinations. Forty-seven states in the U.S. (maybe 48 soon with a bill in the senate now), as well as Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico have enacted some legislation or regulations for dietitians, or others dispensing nutrition information. **Michigan is one of three remaining states with no state regulations or protections!** Along with Arizona and New Jersey (which currently has a licensure bill in the New Jersey State Senate), Michigan does not even have the minimal title protections that nearly every other state has.

There are four levels of "licensure":

- title protection
- state certification
- licensure with exclusivity
- licensure with inclusivity

As previously mentioned, title protection is the most basic regulation and is the only protection for nutrition professionals in three states. It requires that anyone claiming the title of "dietitian", "nutritionist" or any other title specified in the legislation, have specific credentials (also laid out in the legislation). This means that anyone could still dispense nutrition advice professionally, they just could not use the protected titles. Given that Michigan does not have even this legal provision, anyone can call themselves a dietitian or nutritionist even without possessing any education or experience. In states with title protection only, the state also does not regulate ethics or standards of practice for the profession.

The next step up in state licensure is state certification. This includes the lower level of title protection, as well as state-established standards of practice and ethics. However, those who are not certified by the state can still do the job of a dietitian or nutritionist, they just cannot hold the protected titles and they are not held to those crucial standards of practice.

The strictest protections come from licensure, which can be with inclusivity or exclusivity. This allows those individuals practicing in a state with "licensure" to have the title protection and holds them to the ethics and standards of practice of state certification, *and* limits non-titled people from providing those services that are within the protected profession's scope of practice.

Licensure in many states also includes language allowing dietitians to write their own therapeutic diet orders. Within the state of Michigan, dietitians are not allowed to write these orders without the

approval of the attending physician and the hospital they work for. This is because the state law in Michigan allows the hospitals to make those decisions.

Why do we need licensure in Michigan?

Licensure is more than just another credential to pay for. It protects consumers by requiring that anyone calling themselves by a certain title also has the education, experience and examinations required to do so. It can help prevent harm by “protecting against unsafe or inaccurate nutrition advice or interventions that may lead to poor or even dangerous health outcomes.”¹ Patients, clients and customers can know that they are getting the highest quality, evidence-based care possible by a qualified professional. This can help reduce not only adverse health outcomes, but also wasteful spending on services from unlicensed individuals without the knowledge or practice to back up what they are selling. People should be able to easily identify when they are getting help from a qualified health professional and when they are not.

In addition to protecting consumers from harm, licensure laws protect the “dietitians”, “nutritionists” and any other title specified, and help elevate the status that is equal to the importance of the job. Dietitians complete bachelor’s level education (soon to be master’s), a minimum of 1200 hours of training, and must successfully pass a credentialing exam in order to provide competent nutrition services to the public. Other professionals looking to dispense nutrition advice may have not had the rigorous schooling or practice that makes them qualified to do so. Licensure holds nutrition professionals to a higher standard, which is good for the public and the professionals.

What can students do to help?

The Michigan Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is currently working on licensure legislation and hopes to have information to announce at this year’s fall conference. In the meantime, Bethany Thayer, MS, RDN and co-chair of the Licensure Task Force for the Michigan Academy Board says “get to know your State reps!” Find out who the State Representative and Senator are for your district. For many students, their district may not be the one they are currently living in, if they are away for school. Using a home address (what’s on a driver’s license), state legislators for a district can be found at

<http://www.house.mi.gov/mhrpublic/frmFindARep.aspx> and
<http://www.senate.michigan.gov/fysbyaddress.html>.

Do your research and get to know them. Reach out during coffee hours and office hours. Also, find out which committees they sit on. The licensure bills will likely be decided in the Health Policy Committee or Regulatory Reform Committee. If your representative is on either of those committees, they are especially important to reach out to!

Another way to help is to document any cases in which harm is done as a result of poor nutrition recommendations. The national Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics suggests reporting any incidents “directly to one of our members or through the media or courts.”¹ So please be sure to let rotation preceptors and/or professors know if there is something that should be reported.

Take the time to read up on licensure and why it is important, keep up with current legislation and talk about it to anyone who will listen!

References:

1. <https://www.eatrightpro.org/advocacy/licensure/professional-regulation-of-dietitians>

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