

Former Intern's Tips for the Road to Becoming a Registered Dietitian

Alexandra Zawilski, MS, RD Graduate of San Diego State University Dietetic Intern at the VA San Diego Healthcare System alexzawilski@gmail.com

Katelyn Mazza, RD, VA San Diego Healthcare System

Sierra Sandifer, RD, VA San Diego Healthcare System

The path to becoming a Registered Dietitian can seem like a long and intimidating process requiring much more than just a degree in nutrition. Throughout the majority of college, graduation is not the primary focus of students studying dietetics. Getting matched to a dietetic internship is often the main goal to achieve prior to graduation. At the start of attending a University, an internship may seem like it is far down the road. However it is never too early to start preparing and getting experience. As former interns and students, we put together some pieces of advice to help you be successful throughout this process. However, keep in mind that there are many different paths to being a competitive candidate for an internship. Do not feel like there is a specific formula you have to follow. Getting an internship is much more than having a good GPA. While this is an important aspect, especially in your science and major specific classes, hands-on experience is extremely valuable. Get involved in the nutrition programs at your University or start one if your school does not already have one. Participate in your classes and get to know your professors and peers. If you can, try to obtain a Teaching Assistant position in a class that you enjoyed. This will allow you to get some leadership experience and also connect with a faculty member. Other opportunities might include nutrition counseling programs, tutoring, or working in the student health center. While these positions tend to not pay a whole lot, if at all, these experiences will be extremely valuable and can end up getting you an excellent letter of recommendation for your internship. Paid experiences are hard to come by but volunteer experiences tend to be more plentiful. We recommend that you try to get a wide variety of volunteer experiences to strengthen your resume and also open up your eyes to the many areas of nutrition that exist. Working in a field is often different than learning about it in the classroom. Volunteering in a variety of different settings will help you figure out what path of dietetics you want to pursue and will also make you a well-rounded internship candidate. With this being said, it is also important to remember that the longer you are with an organization, the richer the experience will be. Sticking with an organization and treating it like a job will also demonstrate your reliability. If you are interested in an internship with a clinical emphasis, try to get experience in a hospital. Whether it is volunteering, working in food service, or working as a diet clerk, this will help you get comfortable talking to patients and being in a hospital setting. Throughout all of your experiences, remember to keep a record of how many hours you work. You will need this when you are applying to internships. You will thank yourself later for staying organized in these early stages. Another vital aspect to your dietetics career is networking. Getting involved in your local dietetics association is a great opportunity to meet professionals in the field. We also recommend finding a mentor. This may be a professor, employer, former student, etc. The world of dietetics is smaller than you realize so be careful to not burn any bridges. You may be surprised at how often you will re-connect with people. Furthermore, when someone asks you to do something, say yes! It may sound scary or not be something you could see yourself doing but you might end up enjoying it. Plus, you show your mentor that you have a great work ethic and are up for anything. Although dietetic internships are worthwhile, most tend to be fairly costly. Plan ahead and try to start saving as soon as possible. Dietetic internships are not eligible for student loans. Take advantage of scholarships that are available through your University early on. Some employers and non-profit organizations also have scholarships available if you seek them out. You will

also want to keep track of any scholarships or honors that you are awarded for your internship applications. As you progress through your program, you will start to think more and more about applying to dietetic internships. Start seriously researching internships at least one year before you are ready to apply. There are tons of great internships across the country and if you are willing to relocate, you may increase your odds of getting a match. Remember that most internships are only a year and this can be a unique opportunity to move to a 19|NDEP-Line | Fall 2016 new city that you would not otherwise think about living in. Most internships offer open-houses for applicants who are interested in their program. They provide more detailed information about the program and allow you to meet some of your potential preceptors and tour the facility. The application for dietetic internships can be extremely time consuming. Start working on these at least a few months before the applications are due. Most applications require personal statements, letters of recommendation, and some supplemental information. Don't make the mistake of sending the same generic personal statement to all of the internships you are applying to. If you are applying to an internship with a clinical emphasis, tailor your personal statement to that, etc. For your letters of recommendation, ask professors and employers that you have built a strong relationship with that can speak to your character. Be sure to ask for your letters of recommendation well ahead of time. Not only is this the courteous thing to do, but if you ask someone to write you a letter a week before applications need to be submitted, you will likely not get a very good recommendation. Give yourself a deadline of when you want to have everything submitted by. We recommend submitting your applications at least a week before the actual due date to avoid a headache and last minute scrambling. After match day (the best day of our lives), take a deep breath and know that you've made it this far for a reason. The internship is completely different from your didactic learning, have fun! You will often find yourself in situations that can be stressful. Do not forget that you started in the nutrition profession because this was something you loved. Remember to enjoy the process and get everything you can out of it. Be present. Different dietetic internships vary greatly from one another, but there are some general ways to ensure success. Stay organized. Invest in a fun planner and use it. You will be constantly going to new places and working with new people. Get a head start on your projects and try not to procrastinate. Treat the internship like it's a job. You are not a student anymore. Be professional and be on time or better, show up early. Always make a good first impression. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. You will likely be in a lot of awkward situations where you are unsure what to say and how to act. Get used to it and try not to stress over it. Remember that no one is perfect the first time they do something. Put in a good effort and remember to learn from your mistakes. Make an effort to build a good relationship with your preceptors, even if the rotation is something that you don't particularly enjoy. Many people find that they end up liking a field that they never thought they would so do not rule something out before you even get started. Connect with your fellow interns and avoid treating the internship like it is a competition. When talking with patients, if nothing else, establish rapport with them. They will be more likely to take your recommendations if they feel comfortable with you and trust you. Don't be afraid to ask for help. No one expects you to be an expert in everything you do. That's why you are an intern. You are here to learn and your preceptors are there to help you. Although becoming a Registered Dietitian requires hard-work, planning and time, it is a worthwhile, achievable goal. The process requires a great deal of effort but is every bit as rewarding. Stay focused and enjoy the journey to becoming an RD, it will go by faster than you imagine!