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Building a Ship While Sailing: Transition to a Virtual Dietetic Internship in Response to COVID-19

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Learning Outcome: Describe adaptations made to existing clinical rotations to provide a virtual experience for students during the COVID-19 pandemic

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic presented practical and logistical challenges for dietetic interns to meet clinical rotation requirements in the spring of 2020. To overcome this hurdle, a creative and strategic plan was launched to transition from in-person to virtual clinical rotations.

Methods: OHSU's robust and well-supported online asynchronous and synchronous learning platforms made the transition to online learning seamless. Virtual patient encounters were created using an online medical record program, EHRGo®, offering 600 unique patient scenarios for interns to assess using the Nutrition Care Process. Notes were submitted for feedback.

Results: Interns engaged in self-study of course materials and virtual small-group discussions with preceptors. Using multiple platforms yielded similar contact time as traditional in-person rotations. A professional development week was used to improve web-based interviewing skills, social media profiles, and resumes. Webinars and university training programs led to better understanding of unconscious bias, behavioral health and suicide prevention, and sustainable and resilient food systems in a time of heightened food insecurity and uncertainty. Virtual panel discussions offered venues to ask questions about employment, managing stress, and job-seeking strategies of clinical nutrition managers, practicing dietitians, and recent graduates of the internship. Daily engagement with faculty was key to this successful transition as we followed "stay-safe-at-home" mandates.

Conclusion: Online education and virtual experiences have become cornerstones of dietetics education. The question now is, "How do we leverage the successes from this experience to build resiliency and continuity into our "new normal" and move forward as stronger, more efficient dietetics educators and preceptors?"

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