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NEWS



For immediate release

Ouachita launches graduate Dietetic Internship during pandemic

By Rachel Gaddis

December 14, 2021

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

To say you started anything new in 2020 would, well, raise eyebrows – especially launching something as involved and hands-on as an academic program including clinical healthcare. But that's exactly what Ouachita did during the 2020-2021 academic year, launching its first graduate programs in more than 20 years. The new programs are producing quick fruit, with seven students earning Ouachita's first-ever post-baccalaureate certificate for dietetic internships in May 2021. (The first cohort of applied behavior analysis master's degree students will graduate in August 2021.)

"Ten years ago, the placement rate for nutrition & dietetics students in a post-graduate internship was only about 50% nationwide; there was a shortage of internships," said Dr. Detri Brech, Ouachita's Charles S. and Elma Grey Goodwin Holt Professor of Dietetics and Pre-Medical Studies and chair of the Department of Nutrition & Dietetics. "Seeing the need is what led us on the road we are now. We used to have students who couldn't be placed in an internship due to a lack of spots. We saw that and talked many times about how we knew this was something that Ouachita could provide."

Following additional market research that reflected a growing nationwide need for registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs), Ouachita set a goal for launching the post-baccalaureate Dietetic Internship program in August 2020. The department moved quickly to hire Holly Kyzer, a 2000 Ouachita graduate, to serve as instructor and director of the new program and complete the process for gaining accreditation by the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics.

"We are reaching students all over the U.S. and providing a seamless education from incoming freshmen to entry-level registered dietitian nutritionists entering the workforce," Brech said. "We are meeting a demand by providing this program."

Ouachita's Dietetic Internship offers students 18 hours of academic credit – more than any program like it in the state of Arkansas – combining on-campus and online coursework, 1,200 hours of clinical practice and one-, two- and three-week rotations among more than 35 sites of students' choice in locations across the state. And students also complete the program in only nine months.

"Nutrition is one of those fields where you can help people prevent and deal with a condition or disease that they have, and it might be a better option than prescription medications," Kyzer explained. "And, you can go into any area you are interested in: sports nutrition, pediatric nutrition, diabetes, obesity, weight loss, marketing and social media, eating disorders, schools, nursing homes, hospitals, research. You find that niche that you like, and you can basically create your own job."

Ouachita's program divided the required supervised practice hours into three different types of sites – clinical, community and administrative (or food service) sites so that students see the diversity of options available for their career. More than 120 preceptors have signed on to serve as supervisors for Ouachita students, and new preceptors are added to meet students' interests, building the database of options for future students to experience, as well.

"This program provided hands-on experience in all different aspects of nutrition," said Shelby Kraft, a 2021 Dietetic Internship graduate from Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. "I feel confident and ready for a career as a registered dietitian."

"Shelby told me in her first two-week rotation, 'I learned more in my first two weeks than my entire undergraduate experience,'" Kyzer said. "We had a great year, despite COVID-19, because the majority of our rotations were still in-person, not virtual, while most of the country was shut down."

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Kyzer said their team was pleasantly surprised "to find sites and preceptors open to working with students," even amid the pandemic. Many preceptors also happened to be Ouachita alumni who "stepped up and were more than willing to go above and beyond to help our students," she said. Students trained one-on-one under preceptors in areas ranging from cardiology, oncology/critical care and pediatric research to the Health Department, Head Start and sports nutrition.

As an in-demand healthcare career, nutrition & dietetics requires – and will continue to require – necessary training and advanced degrees. Before graduating from Ouachita with a major in biology and minor in chemistry, Kyzer took an elective course in nutrition and loved it. She returned to complete the requirements to qualify for a dietetic internship.

"In order to become a registered dietitian (RD), you have to earn a Bachelor of Science degree in nutrition & dietetics or a related field and complete an internship before you can sit for the RD exam," Kyzer said. "And in January of 2024, a new requirement will be to have a master's degree along with the internship in order to sit for the RD exam."

On the heels of this year's promising launch of the Dietetic Internship, Ouachita began working toward expanding to offer the full Master of Science degree in nutrition & dietetics and currently is pending approval from the Higher Learning Commission. A graduate program in education also is expected to be approved by the HLC for 2022.

Kyzer said she is excited for Ouachita's Department of Nutrition & Dietetics to be "a one-stop shop" for students seeking to be RDs.

“As a student, you can fall in love with Ouachita, earn your bachelor’s degree in nutrition & dietetics, pursue the internship and stay on this beloved campus,” she said. For those with some concurrent credits, “Within four to five years they can have their bachelor’s, internship and a master’s (elsewhere or, hopefully, from here) and be ready to sit for the RD exam.”

It promises to be a bright future for the department, but they also are taking time to give thanks for the feats achieved in this unusual year.

“I will always remember this group of students because of how they dealt with this in a pandemic. Things were always changing,” Kyzer noted. “Our students all came through it with remarkable grace and good attitudes.

“Year one is done,” she said, laughing. “Who knew we were this tough?”



By Rachel Gaddis, editorial coordinator