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2023-2024** March 20, 2024

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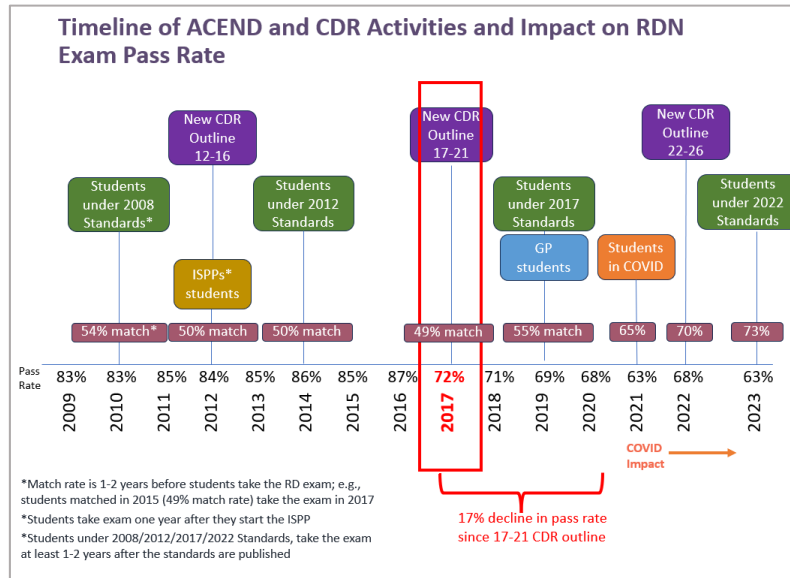
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Dear Educators,

We write to you today to address the persistent challenge our nutrition and dietetics programs are facing with the declining national pass rate on the Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) exam. In 2016, the RDN national exam first-time pass rate was at an all-time high of 87%. This rate dropped suddenly and dramatically in 2017 by 15 percentage points to 72% and continued to decline reaching its lowest point of 63% in 2021 and again in 2023 (data for 2023 is for July 1–December 31 period only), representing a 25% drop in seven years. Commentators speculated that this decline is the result of programs accepting students with lower grade point averages, poor quality nutrition and dietetics programs, increased number of distance programs, COVID-19, improved match rate, poor exam validity, and other rationales. As we grapple with this situation, the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND®) would like to provide our programs with a number of key points for consideration that are evidence-based and not based on ungrounded speculations.

- 1. The pass rate has impacted the vast majority of ACEND nutrition and dietetics programs.** Some opined that a certain number of programs are weak and of poor quality. These weaker programs are the only programs experiencing a decline in the pass rate and impacting the drop in the national pass rate. Recent data from ACEND disproves this opinion and shows that the vast majority of programs have been impacted. In 2016, 202 of 506 (40%) nutrition and dietetics supervised practice programs boasted 100% first-time pass rate. This number dwindled in 2022 to only 71 of 502 programs (14%).
- 2. Nutrition and dietetics students are no different than other students nationwide.** The assumption that students entering the field of dietetics are suddenly of lower academic ability, resulting in the declining first-time pass rate is easily disproved. The RDN exam first-time pass rate dropped 15 percentage points in one single year, from 87% in 2016 to 72% in 2017. No other health profession saw a decline in 2017; for example, the first-time pass rate on the nursing NCLEX-RN exam rose by 3 percentage points that year¹, and for the speech-language pathology PRAXIS exam, the score rose by 1 percentage point². Such a sharp fall in the pass rate, limited only to the RDN exam, cannot be explained by this assumption. All 500 plus RDN dietetics programs did not simultaneously, in the same year span, select the weakest students among all the health professions. ACEND asks our educators to refrain from disparaging their wonderful and excellent students by calling them weak or poorly qualified based on anecdotal information.

3. **The quality of education offered by the nutrition and dietetics programs did not decline.** The same argument as that of poor-quality students can be applied in this instance. All 500 plus RDN dietetics programs, many of which are located in some of the most prestigious higher education institutions and medical centers in the nation, did not coincidentally cease to provide quality education in the same year. ACEND would argue that with the increase to the graduate level and the incorporation of the Graduate Programs under the Future Education Model Standards, the quality of the nutrition and dietetics programs did not decline but, in fact, has been elevated. Such allegations denigrate our outstanding faculty and educators and their commitment and dedication to the success of dietetics students and the profession.
4. **Distance programs have similar pass rates as programs offered fully in-person.** ACEND conducted an analysis to compare the program outcomes of its distance programs compared to onsite programs. For every single ACEND-required objective, including program completion, employment, and RDN exam pass rate (first-time and one-year), distance programs showed similar outcomes compared to onsite programs. In fact, in 2021, graduates of Didactic Programs in Dietetics (DPD) that are fully online had higher average first-time pass rate on the RDN exam (72%) compared to in-person DPDs (64%). This difference was statistically significant at $P < .05^3$. No differences were observed with other program types.
5. **Dietetic Internship (DI) programs continue to accept students with high grade point averages (GPAs).** Another unvalidated opinion that has frequently been shared is that the declining enrollment has led DI programs to lower their admission requirement and to *“accept DPD students with poor GPAs as low as 2.3.”* ACEND conducted an analysis in 2022 examining DI programs’ admission criteria and found that 97% of DI programs continue to set a minimum GPA requirement of 3.0, and the average GPA of students accepted into DI programs was 3.4. An exam that fails more than 35% of students with a 3.4 GPA puts the exam’s validity into question and not the student’s ability.
6. **There is no correlation between the RDN exam first-time pass rate and the match rate.** A few speculated that the RDN exam pass rate declined as a result of the increased match rate which led to weaker DPD students with lower GPAs getting accepted into DI programs. As indicated above, the GPA of students accepted into DI programs remains strong and, in 2022, averaged 3.4. Moreover, graduates taking the RDN exam in 2017, the year that experienced the 15-point drop in exam score, participated in the match during the two years that had the lowest match rates experienced in dietetics: 2015 with 49% match and 2016 with a 47% match which is the lowest match rate recorded, discrediting these speculations.
7. **The 2017 ACEND Accreditation Standards did not impact the exam pass rate.** The hypothesis that the 15-percentage point decline in the RDN exam in 2017 was due to the adoption of the 2017 Standards is without merit. The 2017 ACEND Accreditation Standards were adopted on June 1, 2017; students graduating under the 2017 Standards would not be eligible to take the exam until 2018 and beyond. Graduates taking the exam in 2017 studied under the 2012 Standards. These are the same Standards that had some of the highest RDN exam first-time pass rates in recent history: 85% from 2013-2015 and 87% in 2016. Most importantly, in 2017, the only change that took place is the Commission on Dietetic Registration’s (CDR) unveiling and adoption of the new *Registration Examination for Dietitians Test Specifications and Study Outline 2017-2021, Approved by CDR February 2016*^{4,5}. The first time these new specifications were put into effect, the score of examinees dropped by 15 percentage points, as shown in the figure below.



- The decline in the pass rate took place prior to COVID-19.** The coronavirus pandemic has certainly impacted student learning and exam pass rates. In fact, most health professions have experienced a 2%-7% decline in their first-time pass rates between 2021 and 2022, mostly attributed to COVID-19 (~5% decline in dietetics). As shown in the figure above, the RDN exam first-time pass rate, however, dropped 17 percentage points between 2017 and 2020, before the impact of COVID-19 took effect.
- Dietetics is the only health profession that experienced a 25% drop in pass rate.** The argument that the steep decline in pass rate is being observed by all health professions does not hold. ACEND reviewed the recent changes in the national first-time pass rates of many health professions. Dietetics was the only profession that saw a significant drop in 2017. Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 on exam scores began in 2021 and can be isolated. The data in the table below show the change in the pass rates of other health professions' exams for the past 5-7 years and their respective first-time pass rate for 2022 compared to the RDN exam.

Health Profession Exam	Decline in Exam Pass Rate	2022 First-Time Pass Rate
Physician Assistants (PA- PANCE) ⁶	~3%	92%
Physical Therapy (PT- NAPTE) ⁷	~6%	85%
Speech-Language Pathology (SLP- PRAXIS) ⁸	~2%	82%
Pharmacy (NAPLEX) ⁹	~6%	80%
Dentistry (NBDE) ¹⁰	No decline. Score increased by 4%	88%
Nursing (NCLEX) ¹	~7%	80%
Occupational Therapy (OT-OTR) ¹¹	~7%	77% (one year pass rate 96%)
Dietetics (RDN)	25%	68% (63% in 2021 and 2023; one year pass rate 84%)

The table above shows that the health education environment at-large is experiencing about a 2-7% decline in national exam pass rates, mostly attributed to COVID-19, higher education changes, enrollment struggles and other global impacts. Dietetics is the only profession that has experienced an

unprecedented and unheard-of decline in pass rate, and 17% of this decline cannot be explained by changes within the larger context. Besides dietetics, OT is the other health profession with a first-time exam pass rate in 2022 below 80%. Of note is that the one-year pass rate for the OTR exam is 96%, whereas it is only 84% for the RDN exam, suggesting a much higher number of repeat test takers for the RDN exam and the draining of financial resources and increased levels of anxiety and stress experienced by RDN exam candidates.

Poor exam pass rate has been an area of concern for ACEND for several years and a regular topic of discussion for the ACEND Board. In 2023, with no clear steps to improve the situation, ACEND requested meetings be held with the Academy BOD, ACEND, and CDR leadership to discuss potential solutions. The meetings are underway. In addition, we have shared our concerns with many leadership groups within and outside the Academy. Such groups include the Academy Board of Directors (BOD), the Academy Foundation Board, the Nutrition and Dietetics Educators and Preceptors (NDEP) Council, the Association of Nutrition Departments and Programs (ANDP), and others. During these meetings, we worked diligently using only factual data to address and correct the unfounded allegations made by uninformed individuals voicing their biases towards dietetics students and programs. This letter shares the data available to ACEND, and we ask our educators to refrain from adding to the unvalidated claims and come together in solidarity to work with CDR as we examine the root causes of the problem and devise solutions to fix what is broken.

After receiving the latest message announcement from CDR, many of you asked if ACEND was involved in these decisions. ACEND and CDR operate autonomously, and in the spirit of this autonomy we were not consulted on these changes. Like many of you, ACEND welcomes CDR's time extension of 30 minutes to the RDN and NDTR exams for all candidates. We are thankful to the CDR Commission for this positive change. The introduction of the test bundle voucher, however, is disconcerting. It sends a negative message to students, employers, and the public at large about the validity of the RDN exam to necessitate such an extreme measure. The bundle threatens to widen the chasm between the privileged few and marginalized students, further increasing the inequities in our profession. We fear that a two-for-one bundle will do little to improve the RDN exam situation; on the contrary, those who purchase the bundle may take the exam without studying as a "test," leading to steeper declines in the national pass rate.

During a dietetics labor market shortage and an era of low student enrollments, any factor further reducing the number of available dietetics practitioners is a cause for major concern. If the drop in the pass rate continues, the negative implications could go beyond the number of available dietitians. It would impact the diversity of the dietetics workforce, the availability of dietetics positions lost to other professions, and would diminish dietetics representation nationwide. It is time we united to explore and analyze the root causes for this low pass rate based on available evidence.

As always, ACEND remains your partner working together to produce exceptional and diverse practitioners to meet the needs of the future.

Sincerely,

The ACEND Board

References

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