

Theresa Laurenz,
MS, RD, LDN



The Dietitian's CHANGED ROLE

The role of the campus dietitian has changed greatly in the more than 25 years that Rick Thomas, Executive Director of Norris Center and Student Services for Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., has been in higher education.

"Many years ago, it was all about recipes and the food pyramid," he said. "It was a lot less about individualized customer service. Today's campus dietitian has to be part scientist, part counselor, part teacher and I would go as far as to say part flight attendant in that they are really providing hands-on, frontline service today to our end consumer — the students. Twenty-five years ago, I suspect

the campus dietitian spent their time in an office, not necessarily sitting down with students all that directly, but more simply working with the chefs to run the recipes and develop the nutritional information."

The new role of the campus dietitian is no more evident than with the dietitian on Thomas' campus, Theresa Laurenz, MS, RD, LDN, the district dietitian with Sodexo, Northwestern's foodservice provider.

"There are three main areas that I work with for the students," she said. "One being the food allergies or dietary needs for students who are going to be

eating with us. The second one is nutritional counseling and the third is group presentations."

Special Dietary Needs

Laurenz works with students with special dietary needs like lactose intolerance, celiac disease or peanut allergies. "I want to make sure they have as many options as possible and that they are getting the appropriate food for them and making sure that they have a variety. If somebody has an allergy to dairy, I make sure that they know what options they have available to them and coordinate with the chefs to do whatever is needed to make sure that they are getting all of the food and all of the nutrients that they need."

Each year, about 12 new students report to her with some sort of food allergy, although there may be more on campus. "I don't have the exact number, because some students just try to fend for themselves because maybe they are embarrassed or feel uncomfortable trying to seek out help," she said.

Laurenz also introduces these students to the culinary staff. "I want them to have the best relationships they can have with the chefs as possible. They initially come to me and I bring them to the different chefs. I give them all of the different contact information for all of the different dining halls and chefs they would be working with. It depends on the severity of the allergy or special dietary need."

She continued, “If someone is very sensitive to a certain allergen, we may have the chefs make all of their food separately, which means coordinating with that student to call or e-mail ahead to the chefs every meal that they want prepared, which can be a little tricky and it takes a lot of time on the student’s part to know ‘I am going to be at the dining hall at 5 p.m. and I would like a stir-fry that is gluten free.’ The chef will coordinate that.”

Unfortunately, students don’t always follow those procedures. “My job is to make sure that the student is following up and doing those things,” she said. “Often what we find is the students will want to do that and they’ll start off that way and then they kind of fall off and start eating from the salad bar all the time, which is not necessarily going to get them the most variety of food. They are only getting so much nutrition if they are eating off of the salad bar every day because they know that that’s safe.”

She works to teach them lessons they can use for their entire lives. “A lot of times it is encouraging students to plan ahead, which comes to another whole side of the game which is managing their time, which is very difficult. That is a lesson that they will learn in college and throughout life — in order to add in that physical activity and make time to menu plan and meal plan and grocery shop — things that people need to do every day of their life. They are forced to learn that even moreso in a college setting if they have a food allergy because it forces them to know and plan ahead when their meals are going to be and what they want. That is something that is brought up with these students, and is not only getting them to feel safe and comfortable in our process, but also working with them so they don’t fall off the tracks and fend for themselves.”

Broadening the students’ culinary horizons is also important to her. “With any food allergy or special diet or medical diet, a lot of times, they eat the same things,” said Laurenz. “They know the safe foods and they eat them over and

over again. My job is to make sure they know all the options that they have and they plan all of the food groups and all of the nutrients and everything they need for themselves.”

Working with students is something that Thomas deems very important. “What makes our program work really well is this kind of one-on-one, very personalized service that Theresa is able to give individuals,” he said. “Over my years here at Northwestern, some of the most wonderful positive letters we have received from parents have been those families who Theresa or her predecessor in the role, had really taken the time to walk

through the operations. Not just what they can eat, but to expand their horizons so maybe they can eat more than what they routinely would have tried to eat safely within their condition. If it is counseling an individual that has other special needs, it is the one-on-one personalized attention that I think is really key to what works for us.”

In addition to working with students, she works with the culinary staff on proper preparation techniques for students with special dietary needs. “Every quarter, we have been implementing training to all of the foodservice employees on food allergies and cross-contamination and

any questions they have. I try to go to each dining hall separately. That way we can discuss how the year has been going and which students they have come across and personalizing it to that student to make sure that what they do is proper — if they wash their hands, if they change their gloves — that will directly affect that student that they know and have already met. That has been really helpful to have those concrete examples where they can really put a face to why they need to follow recipes and do all of the things that would affect someone with a food allergy.”

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Nutritional Counseling

Laurenz works with students on a one-on-one basis for other food issues.

“The topics may range from eating disorders that I get referrals from therapists and counselors on campus, to weight loss or weight gain, or if they want to try and do a vegan diet for the first time and aren’t sure how to go about it.”

Thomas has seen an increase in the number of students with food issues. “I have certainly seen a change in the nature of the students coming in our universities. We see students coming in with more emotional and psychological issues and some of them happen to be related to eating disorders. Certainly we see more of that today than when I was a very young professional. Whether or not there are truly more people who identify and have been diagnosed is an open question. Certainly, today we know that we see more students arriving on our campus as incoming freshmen with various psychological challenges and issues including eating disorders.”

While this area is not directly related to the culinary operations, she does work with students to choose the right foods to eat. “For students who want to become vegan or vegetarian, I do individualized meal plans. Just like a student with food



allergies, I find out what they are currently doing as far as their eating habits. I see what things they may be lacking in, in order to fit in a vegan-style diet and I recommend what foods they can fill in to make sure that they have the whole package. Often I do use different things that we serve at the dining hall.”

when I get to see and hear about what is currently happening. I am always surprised at what things they are interested in and what myths and what questions they come across. That is what I often use, that information of what they think is the newest fad or the newest myth. That is usually the topic I choose when I do the presentations in the dining hall to address the rest of the population that this is a better solution to a new fad diet or a new concept that is out there.”

The Future

If a current study — by a Northwestern faculty member — published in the *Journal Pediatrics* is accurate, the number of special dietary needs will increase. “It said that 1 in 13 children today has a food allergy,” said Thomas. “That just struck me tremendously. I did the math and thought, ‘What does that mean potentially for our incoming classes this fall. We welcome about 2,000 students to Northwestern every fall, so essentially, somewhere around 250 students are going to walk through our doors with a known food allergy.’ Theresa is going to have to deal with them and support them one way or another. If I ever questioned the need for a campus dietitian, here is the reason.”

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What is Celiac Disease?

Celiac Disease (CD) is a lifelong inherited autoimmune condition affecting children and adults, according to the Celiac Disease Foundation. When people with CD eat foods that contain gluten, it creates an immune-mediated toxic reaction that causes damage to the small intestine and does not allow food to be properly absorbed. Even small amounts of gluten in foods can affect those with CD and cause health problems. Damage can occur to the small bowel even when there are no symptoms present.

Gluten is the common name for the proteins in specific grains that are harmful to persons with celiac disease. These proteins are found in all forms of wheat (including durum, semolina, spelt, kamut, einkorn and faro) and related grains, such as rye, barley and triticale.

Group Presentations

In addition to meeting with students on a one-on-one basis, Laurenz speaks to groups on a number of nutrition issues. “Every quarter, I am at the dining halls, we have six, and I do different presentations on a variety of different topics. Along with those dining hall presentations, I will also go into sororities, sports teams and clubs and resident halls and do fireside chats. It will be a group of maybe ten people from resident floors and we will have very intimate conversations for an hour or two all about nutrition and healthy eating and healthy body image and exercise.”

The presentations are a great way to know what is on students’ minds — and to learn some of the latest nutrition myths. “These are fun,” she said. “These are the times