

# UW-Milwaukee: Three higher education institutions combine efforts on nutrition project

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MILWAUKEE\_The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee Area Technical College and Mount Mary University are combining efforts to improve and expand access to nutrition and dietetics education, with a special emphasis on diversifying the workforce.

The three institutions recently received a \$30,000 Higher Education Challenge Planning Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to plan pathways for students to move easily between current and planned nutrition and dietetics programs to earn degrees and certification in the field.

One key goal of the planning grant is to build the interinstitutional infrastructure to lower barriers to the pursuit of nutrition and dietetics-related professions, particularly for students from traditionally marginalized groups, said Lori Klos, associate professor of nutritional sciences in UWM's College of Health Sciences and project director. Heidi Katte, chair of MATC's Nutrition and Dietetic Program, and Patricia Kempen, department chair of Mount Mary's dietetics program, are the co-directors.

"While we can build in educational opportunities to help nutrition professionals be culturally competent, we want to make sure that the cadre of professionals operating in this field are as diverse as the communities that they serve," said Klos.

Currently, there is a "profound lack of diversity" within the profession, according to the grant's project summary. About 27% of Milwaukee County residents identify as African American and 15% identify as Hispanic or Latino, but no more than 1% of the credentialed nutrition professionals in the state are from underrepresented

groups.

“Milwaukee has a rich blend of diverse people,” said Katte. “I have had the opportunity to work and teach here for over 25 years at a variety of health care and academic institutions. With this USDA planning grant opportunity, we are working to ensure all students with interest in nutrition are able to efficiently move through our local higher education settings, gaining the knowledge, skills and abilities to return and work in their communities.”

UWM, Mount Mary and MATC all offer or are planning dietetics-related courses and degrees. The grant will help them work together to develop a comprehensive network that would include all levels of preparation from a professional certification to a master’s degree in the field. Students could transfer easily among the programs, which would work together on curriculum development and instruction systems to expand student opportunities, according to Klos.

“A master’s degree, which will be required for practitioners beginning in 2024, can be daunting for many students,” Kempen said. “A collaboration among these three institutions will help build a clear and efficient pathway that will serve to eliminate many obstacles.”

UWM is planning to reconfigure its B.S. in nutritional sciences program to include guided pathways in pre-dietetics, wellness/health coaching and a pathway for students to attain the Nutrition and Dietetic Technician registered credential by partnering with MATC.

Mount Mary and MATC currently have an agreement that provides a seamless transfer process for MATC dietetic technician students to enter Mount Mary’s bachelor’s degree program. This grant will help solidify the details of that agreement, and show the curriculum beyond for the graduate to achieve the master’s degree.

The collaborative efforts will also focus on broadening the education of future professionals in the field to explore food insecurity and hunger, specifically in the Milwaukee area. As the coronavirus epidemic has demonstrated, said Klos, low-income and communities of color are particularly affected by health disparities.

“Dietary intake and eating behavior are incredibly complex,” Klos said. “It’s tempting to say people just need to make better choices and it’s an issue of

personal responsibility – when in reality, the community in which people live and the economic situation in which they are embedded and changing environmental events restrict people’s choices.”

“What foods are available and accessible to members of our community can have profound health implications,” she added.

The USDA planning grant runs for 20 months through spring 2022. At that point, according to Klos and the grant team, they will apply for additional grant funds from USDA to start implementing the changes.