

A Closer Look at Dietary Supplements: An Exercise in Experiential Learning

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Americans spend approximately \$12.8 billion dollars annually on dietary supplements (DS). As nutrition educators, we apply scientific knowledge and principles to dietary trends in order to educate different populations. However, students often struggle with communication when discussing the topic of nutrition. The objective of this study was thus to provide an experiential learning experience to help medical nutrition therapy students better understand how to communicate nutrition and metabolic processes by ascertaining and comparing the actual health benefits of DS to the health claims. The project included the following steps: 1. Identification of the top DS sold in the U.S. based on the most recent NHANES (2003-2006) data set, 2. Distribution of DS fact sheets for consumer and health professionals from the NIH ODS, 3. Compilation of health claims for the corresponding DS, 4. Instruction on federal regulation of DS, health claims and labels, and 5. Comparison of the DRI, food sources, digestion, metabolism and function of the health claims for each supplement. Finally, students synthesized the information into a brief paper and presentation. This experiential project engaged students in a multidisciplinary mode of learning and scholarly engagement. Students reported having more confidence to communicate the science to educate individuals about the use of DS, the role of vitamins and minerals in metabolic processes as well as a better understanding of U.S. DS regulation and health-claims. The process provided a unique and innovative approach to help students better understand how to synthesize newly acquired knowledge and effectively communicate current dietary trends.

Keywords: Dietary Supplements, Experiential Learning, Nutrition Education

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