Nutrition and dietetics program receives historic accreditation

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The Nutrition and Dietetics Coordinated Program (NDCP) has been officially accredited by the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND), making it the first of its kind in the Middle East and the third outside of the U.S.

The Dean and the Director of the CP program, Nahla Hwalla, proudly describes this accomplishment as “a dream come true!”

The accreditation is indeed a great accomplishment, considering how the dietetics practice evolved in Lebanon. During the eighties, this practice was disregarded and dietitians were not able to find decent work. However, as the movement for a healthy lifestyle became an important subject matter, dietetics became an indispensable element of healthcare professionals.

As more programs were offered in the universities that ranged from high standards to unfortunately low ones, the market became flooded with dieticians of both high and low competence.

Yet low aptitude cannot be accepted in this field, for a dietitian’s job is not only to set weight loss programs; the right diet can cure diseases like inborn errors of metabolism or can provide decreased symptoms and improved quality of life for cancer patients. A dietitian’s malpractice can cause irreversible damages, and in some cases, death.

In order to help protect patients from dietitian malpractice, a licensing system was set by the government after an initiative started by AUB. To receive a work license, students must graduate with a B.S. in Nutrition, then they must complete an internship for 6 months or more. Students are then qualified to sit for the licensing exam, the colloquium, and become a dietitian. With the work license, a dietitian is thus legally permitted to work in the hospital or to open a private clinic.

Since AUB insists on offering the best, the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences decided to pursue what Hwalla called “a stamp of quality” to distinguish AUB’s high caliber students and began looking into the American accreditation program.
Four years ago, the ACEND opened the door for accreditation outside the U.S, and AUB was one of the first applicants. Hwalla, with a team of faculty members, worked hard to make sure the university met the requirements.

Their work did not go to waste and the accreditation committee was impressed. It however made three changes: the decision for who gets to be a part of the CP program will now be made to the junior year, two courses were added to focus on community nutrition, and internships for the program were restricted to three hospitals: AUBMC, Rafic Hariri University hospital, and Saint George hospital.

The top 20 students with a GPA of 80 and higher are selected to participate in the program. After the program is completed, CP students are able to sit for the Commission on Dietetic Registration examination for dietitians in the U.S., giving them the ability to practice in the U.S.

Hwalla insisted that it was only through the collective work of Zeina Kassaify, Lara Nasreddine, Ammar Olabi, Marie Claire Chamieh, Rachel Close, Dima Halabi, Nadine Mikati, and Maya Nabhani Zeidan that this program came to life.

Members of this team have already started working tirelessly to apply for reaccreditation to sustain this high status for years to come. They are also trying to give current seniors a chance to qualify for this exam and students who finished the CP program before it was accredited a chance to complete the added courses to qualify them for the exam in the U.S.

It is long and hard work, but Hwalla and her colleagues are motivated on providing this chance for their students. As Hwalla said, “The best thing about us is the students.”