

Exploring the Need for Web-Based Training Among School Nutrition Directors



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National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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PURPOSE

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Headquarters

The University of Mississippi
Phone: 800-321-3054
Fax: 800-321-3061
www.nfsmi.org

**Education and Training Division
Technology Transfer Division**
The University of Mississippi
6 Jeanette Phillips Drive
P.O. Drawer 188
University, MS 38677-0188

Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #10077
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601-266-5773
Fax: 888-262-9631

Acknowledgments

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY

**Jamie Zoellner, PhD, RD
Researcher**

**Deborah H. Carr, PhD, RD
Director, Applied Research Division**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Charlotte B. Oakley, PhD, RD, FADA

EXPLORING THE NEED FOR WEB-BASED TRAINING AMONG SCHOOL NUTRITION DIRECTORS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School nutrition directors, supervisors and/or coordinators (SNDs) must function under a complex set of job responsibilities in order to successfully execute their role in managing school nutrition programs. Providing timely and engaging training opportunities to promote knowledge and skill development for SNDs is challenging. In the past several years, online learning and Web-based training (WBT) has gained tremendous popularity with a proliferation of both online course offerings and student enrollment. Although WBT has the potential to meet the diverse learning needs of SNDs, their opinions and interests related to WBT are unknown.

Before committing the resources to develop, test and deliver WBT modules for SNDs, it was important to conduct a WBT needs assessment. The two primary objectives of this needs assessment research were to: 1) qualitatively explore their need and interest in utilizing WBT, and 2) quantitatively determine their perceived knowledge, skill, training, and interest in utilizing WBT within the 14 established functional areas.

Since no known published research or standardized tool existed to address the research objectives, the researchers developed a qualitative and quantitative instrument. Content validity of the instruments was established by an expert review panel including three doctoral-level registered dietitians and two SNDs. Face validity was then established with a convenience sample of three SNDs who pilot tested the instruments.

The resulting qualitative structured-interview questionnaire assessed the following:

- Access to and use of computers and Internet at the place of employment and home,
- Exposure and experiences with previous computer-based education,
- Perceived benefits and barriers of using WBT to acquire new knowledge,
- Perceived benefits and barriers of using WBT for practice activities to further improve skills,
- Potential strategies to promote WBT opportunities, and
- Demographics of the SNDs and their school districts.

In the final quantitative functional area survey, SNDs were asked to respond to the following six questions for each of the 14 functional areas:

- Does your job require you to perform in the functional area (yes or no),
- Rate your knowledge in the functional area (1=poor, 5=very good),
- Rate your skill in the functional area (1=poor, 5=very good),
- Rate your satisfaction in your ability to perform in the functional area (1=very dissatisfied, 5=very satisfied),
- Indicate the forms of continuing education you have received in the functional area, (Meeting, conference or pre-conference; Professional development publication/article; Web-based training, online course, or distance education; Academic course work; Other), and
- Rate your interest in participating in WBT to improve your knowledge and skill in the functional area (1=very disinterested, 5=very interested).

In one final question, SNDs were asked to rank the top 5 functional areas they were most interested in participating in Web-based training (WBT) to improve their knowledge and skills.

In order to evaluate potential differences between SNDs who attended the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) 5-day Orientation to Child Nutrition Management Seminar (attendees) and those who did not (non-attendees), two approaches were used to identify potential participants. For the attendees, contact information for all participants in the NFSMI 5-day orientation during 2004-2006 was obtained. Since the 5-day orientation targets new and aspiring directors, the majority of attendees had less than five years of director experience. Furthermore, approximately 90% of the attendees from 2004-2006 resided in six states including Mississippi, Michigan, Louisiana, Indiana, Florida, and Colorado. In order to closely match the demographics for the non-attendees, the state agency directors from these six states were asked to provide a contact list of SNDs with less than five years of experience. The two lists were cross-referenced with one another to avoid duplicates. The lists were then randomly sampled.

A research packet containing a letter that detailed the purpose of the research, the Consent to Participate form, and the Functional Area Survey along with a NFSMI-addressed stamped envelope was initially mailed to the SNDs. Approximately 5-7 days later the SNDs were contacted via telephone and asked to participate in the qualitative structured-interview questionnaire. Those who consented and participated in the telephone interview were also asked to complete the Functional Area Survey and return it in the envelope provided. Approximately 5-7 days after completion of the telephone survey, participants were mailed a reminder letter to return the Functional Area Survey.

Participants in the qualitative structured-interviews included 42 SNDs with an average of 3.1 (SD \pm 4.6) years of director experience. There were no major differences identified between attendees and non-attendees. Results indicated that the majority of SNDs have the technology infrastructure needed to support WBT at work and at home. Thirty-eight (90%) reported interest

in utilizing WBT to acquire knowledge, and 40 (95%) reported interest in WBT for practice activities to further improve skills. Benefits of WBT included convenience, opportunities to study unfamiliar areas in more detail and practice the skills, ability to gain knowledge and get current information, and accessibility of information. Barriers included lack of instructor/student interaction or feedback to questions, on-site interruptions or time, technology problems, and the motivation or discipline needed to complete assignments.

Of the 42 SNDs participating in the qualitative phase, 34 (81%) completed and returned the Functional Area Survey. In general, within each functional area, SNDs rated their knowledge and skills similarly, and the higher the rating for knowledge and skill was reflected in a more positive satisfaction in job performance. The five functional areas with the highest interest rating and ranking for a WBT format included: (1) Sanitation, Food Safety & Employee Safety, (2) Financial Management & Record Keeping, (3) Nutrition & Menu Planning, and (4) Program Accountability.

Although several previous studies suggested that interest in WBT may be low among school nutrition professionals, these findings suggest the opposite. An overwhelming majority of SNDs expressed interest in utilizing WBT both to acquire knowledge and for practice activities to further improve skills. It is feasible to suggest that preference for WBT may be more related to a lack of availability and resulting exposure, and less related to a lack of interest. This prospect can be supported by the fact that while only 16 (38%) SNDs reported participation in some form of previous WBT, at least 38 (90%) reported they would be interested in participating. Furthermore, the overall thematic counts indicate that SNDs identified substantially more benefits (n=135) of WBT as compared to barriers (n=77). Additionally, when asked to rate their

interest (1=very disinterested, 5=very interested) in participating in WBT for each functional area, the overall mean rating across all functional areas was 4.0.

Although the sampling methodologies were appropriate for this exploratory needs assessment, the small sample somewhat limits generalizability. . It is important to confirm these findings in a larger, more representative sample of SNDs. Overall results indicate that WBT may be a viable delivery method to provide timely training for SNDs. As the potential to integrate WBT into current educational offerings is further investigated, it is important to begin WBT module development with the functional areas as prioritized by SNDs and address the perceived benefits and barriers during the development, field testing, and marketing of WBT modules.