

Member Spotlight

Mary-Jon Ludy, PhD, RDN

Erin Gaffney-Stromberg, PhD, RD
Nutrition Fellow, ORISE in support of USARIEM



Mary-Jon Ludy, PhD, RDN

Our spotlight member for this edition is Mary-Jon Ludy, PhD, RDN. Dr. Ludy is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Nutrition at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Like most academic positions, hers is comprised of the three classical elements of teaching (60%), research (25%), and service (15%). She teaches undergraduate courses in nutritional assessment and clinical nutrition therapy, as well as clinical nutrition at the graduate level. She supervises the research of undergraduate honors students and master's candidates. She writes grants and manuscripts, presents research at conferences, interprets findings for popular press reporters, and reviews journal articles. She is also the acting chair of her college's Research Development Council, serves as a faculty affiliate of her University's Center of Excellence for Health and Wellness Across the Lifespan, and looks forward to being our Research DPG's representative at the 2014 Public Policy Workshop.

Dr. Ludy, please tell us about your background. How did you get to where you are now?

My interest in nutrition began with a GI tract-themed science fair project in 2nd grade science. I continued to nourish that passion with 10 years of 4-H cooking projects. When I arrived at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) as a freshman, it was little wonder that dietetics became my major. From there, I pursued Tufts' combined MS and dietetic internship. That enabled me to begin conducting scientific research – both while interning with a micronutrient supplementation program in Nepal and analyzing data from a cross-sectional study

of adults with HIV in Thailand. Employment as an outpatient clinical dietitian at Massachusetts General Hospital exposed me to the strong behavioral component of eating and my patients' desire to hear positive messages surrounding food. This prompted me to pursue a PhD in nutrition at Purdue where my research focused on whole foods, including chili peppers and peanuts, which may aid in weight management. The fall prior to my dissertation defense, life came full-circle when I was invited to present an alumni lecture at BGSU's annual nutrition symposium. Although I'd intended to complete a post-doctoral project, I was informed of a faculty position that appeared written for me – clinical nutrition, dietetics experience, and research/teaching balance... so here I am back at my alma mater.

Could you please summarize your current research for us?

The broad focus of my research is energy balance through dietary manipulation. Under this broad scope, I have two current projects underway. One is comparing the appetitive effects of spicy, capsaicin-containing peppers vs. non-spicy, capsiate-containing peppers in a traditional meal. This is supported by the Academy, the McCormick Science Institute, and Ajinomoto. The other is an internally-funded project exploring the patterns of weight change in college students. The purpose is to explore my belief that the overweight/obesity epidemic stems from marked overconsumption at specific time points rather than from a small, sustained positive energy balance.

Pedagogically, I am interested in promoting active learning with technology across the dietetics curriculum. A colleague and I obtained a multi-year grant which will enable us to incorporate a technology module across each course in our undergraduate dietetics curriculum (ex. March Madness-style reviews of health apps and professionally-oriented Twitter chats).

How did you become involved/interested in your current line of research?

My training as a nutrition scientist, specializing in human ingestive behaviors, was inspired by my professional experience as a dietitian and upbringing in a rural Appalachian community. Further, it was guided by my desire to conduct research that has practical application in real-life situations and involves students in the research process.

As an outpatient clinical dietitian, my patients frequently approached their appointments having consumed a "last supper," laden with foods they deemed responsible for causing their health problems. These patients expected me to present them with a list of foods that they may never eat again, but were pleasantly surprised to learn and experience the benefits of alternative foods – such as the chili peppers that I now research. I believe that positive recommendations are important modes of disseminating simple, usable nutrition knowledge.

I believe that research provides the opportunity for students to learn actively and become more responsible for their learning

outcomes. Having spent my formative years in a region where obtaining a college education was not the norm, I cherish the opportunity to provide students (many of whom are first-generation college students) with their initial exposure to the research process. I believe that good research drives good teaching, and vice versa.

Dr. Ludy, what advice would you give to a young researcher for developing a successful line of research?

Get out of your office and meet people! Mentors, collaborators, and supporters come from surprising places. To push myself with writing, an interdisciplinary group of tenure-track assistant professors and I formed a peer-review group. For general sanity, a group of new faculty and I gather for a weekly meeting titled "Nerd Club" where we share meals, drinks, and discuss the ups/downs of our transitions to higher education. For example, one of my recent NIH grant submission was developed over the "random" paring with a psychologist on a conference panel.

Don't be afraid to talk with heavy hitters! If you're a student, make connections by going to conferences, and/or by volunteering to transport speakers between the airport and

your university/conference venue. Some of my best career advice has come from shared taxi rides and bus seats. Networking is vital to learning about career opportunities with people in and out of your field of expertise.

Protect your research time! I establish times for writing and am known to post a sign on my door that says, "do NOT interrupt unless someone is hurt or the building is on fire." Also, realize that it is okay to say "NO." As a promising young researcher, everyone is going to want a piece of your time. If you're apprehensive about turning down a project/responsibility, ask your department head if you can use him/her as a shield – "This sounds like a fascinating opportunity, but XXX advised me against it at this time."

What are your career goals?

As a teacher-scholar, I have the special opportunity of providing many students with their initial immersion into nutrition research. My career goal is to promote an early interest, promote understanding, and support research among future nutrition professionals. With this, I hope that a ripple effect will occur: my university will be stronger, students' lives will be richer, the message will amplify to other institutions, and our field will move forward.

How has your affiliation with the Academy impacted your career progression?

I like to think of the Academy as my roots. As a student, Academy scholarships helped support my education, and FNCE sparked my interest in research. As a young investigator, the Academy provided my first externally-funded grant. The Academy's Daily News, Evidence Analysis Library, Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and DPG listserv are my go-to resources. Most of all, I appreciate the professional network that the Academy has helped me create.

If someone were to ask you to explain why research is important to the field of dietetics, what would you say?

Nutrition is a science. Research is the base of any science. Whether or not you choose to practice as a research dietitian, you must be able to evaluate research. The general public is bombarded with both questionable and quality nutrition information. As dietitians, it is our responsibility to use evidence-based guidelines to help consumers navigate our complex food environment.