

Clinical nutrition students understand the value of inclusivity

As a former student athlete who played basketball, rugby and football, Daniel Vela was motivated by his interest in sports to earn his undergraduate degree in food science and human nutrition from the University of Illinois in 2021. “I was just so fascinated with how complex nutrition can be,” says Vela, a Chicago native.

Although there aren’t many men or Latinos in his chosen career, Vela is countering that trend by pursuing a master’s degree in clinical nutrition at RUSH. The second-year student believes his degree will help him close gaps in care for Latinos, who are often reluctant to seek medical attention.



Daniel Vela, a second-year clinical nutrition student, led a food demonstration during his community rotation for Beyond Hunger.

“A lot of providers are not able to relate to the everyday lives of these people,” Vela says. “But bringing different groups of people into this profession to make patients feel heard and supported goes a long way. That’s why I want to work in the clinical field — to make that impact.”

As a first-generation college graduate, he also has a more personal reason to pursue his ambitious career goals. “As much as I’m doing this for me, I’m doing this for my family as well,” Vela says. “Seeing the pride they have in me makes me feel really good.”

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Mark McInerney, DHSc, RD, LDN,
assistant professor and CNDI director

The power of shared values and preferences

First-year clinical nutrition student Belkina Salazar also knows what it means to set high goals. In Venezuela, she worked as a dietitian in a military hospital. But when she



Belkina Salazar on her first day as a student in the clinical nutrition and dietetic internship program at RUSH. She plans to repeat the photo in her cap and gown on graduation day.

moved to the United States in 2016, she was unable to find a job as a dietitian. In 2018, she began working as a diet clerk at RUSH and was promoted to diet technician six months later. She transferred credits to Dominican University and earned her undergraduate degree in 2022. Last fall, she enrolled in the Master’s in Clinical Nutrition and Dietetic Internship program at RUSH while working part-time at the medical center.

“I’m doing this all over again in a different language because I love my profession,” Salazar says. “RUSH is nationally recognized for its combined program, and I can do these at once and then I’m done.”

After graduating, Salazar hopes to offer nutrition support to ICU patients. She believes she has a lot to offer Latino patients who are traditionally underserved in the U.S. health care system.

“As a Latina, I can make patients comfortable because I speak their language and understand and share their cultural values and preferences,” she says. “They know someone is taking care of them who represents them and respects them.”

Expanding the idea of diversity

At RUSH, faculty in the clinical nutrition program strive to make the profession more inclusive by appealing to students from a range of backgrounds and experiences.

“We want to be accountable for serving our patient population, and we recognize that we are so much more effective when the dietetic workforce looks more like the population we serve,” says Mark McInerney, DHSc, RD, LDN, assistant professor and dietetic internship director for the clinical nutrition program. “It’s our responsibility as educators to do everything in our power to make the profession as diverse as possible.”