Preceptors change lives. That’s why I call preceptors the hidden heroes of our profession.

When I think of preceptors, I think of transformational learning. As I share with my students: It is never about if you will be a preceptor, but about when you will mentor it forward by serving the profession as a preceptor.

Critical to the education of students is the work of the Academy group NDEP: Nutrition and Dietetics Educators and Preceptors. As noted on NDEP’s website; NDEP consists of over 1,350 educator and preceptor members with a decision-making body composed of 14 elected members and four appointed members known as the NDEP Council. NDEP represents the large group of educators and preceptors to ACEND, CDR, Council on Future Practice, Board of Directors and other entities within and outside of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

In the words of NDEP’s 2021-2022 chair, Katie Eliot, PhD, RD, LD, FAND, and assistant professor and director of the didactic program at Saint Louis University: “Preceptors are literally the heartbeat of our profession. As educators, we can prepare students from the didactic platform but without the commitment of preceptors, we cannot fully train future professionals to effectively care for the individuals and communities we serve.

“Supporting preceptors is at the core of the NDEP mission,” Eliot says. “We provide training modules, annual awards and webinars specifically designed for preceptors. We deeply value the voice of preceptors on our Preceptor Committee, with the chair serving on the NDEP council. NDEP truly recognizes that preceptors are educators and that our profession could not survive without them.”

Wynnifred Hoodis, MS, RDN, LD, a former clinical dietitian and preceptor at Saint Elizabeth University and NDEP’s current preceptor director, describes her experience — and what qualities make a good preceptor: “It was in the daily interactions of teaching and observing the interns interact with patients and health care professionals that I received the greatest satisfaction. Seeing in real time students grow and develop into soon-to-be dietitians gave me a real sense of purpose.

“A good preceptor can be any RDN or NDTR in the field today. So many of us can still remember one or two practitioners that really made an impact in our current practice. It is not always easy, especially with the increasing demands and responsibilities of health care today. However, it is important work and teaching keeps all of us engaged, up to date in research and trends, to help patients, clients, the community and public,” Hoodis says.

“There are many different styles of precepting that are successful,” says my Kansas State University colleague Amber Howells, PhD, RDN, LD, director of the coordinated program in dietetics. “The most important traits for preceptors include being passionate about the profession and teaching future professionals; consistent and professional communication, including providing constructive feedback to help the intern grow; being able to build an environment conducive to learning and allowing students to make mistakes to learn from and discuss without fear; and being compassionate and empathetic. I would encourage any dietitian with these traits to consider becoming a preceptor.”

Please join me in recognizing the contributions that preceptors make to advance students’ learning towards entry-level practice. Take a few moments from your day to contact your preceptors, who so generously gave of their time, passion and expertise. Our message to all preceptors is a heartfelt “Thank you.”

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Preceptors: Life-Changing Hidden Heroes of Our Profession
I’ve always been passionate about mentoring and professional development, and I remain grateful to those who have helped shape my practice and skills throughout my career. April is National Preceptor Month, when we acknowledge the career-long impact preceptors have made on all of us.