

To Master or Not to Master?—MS/DIs V. DIs

By Corinne Dobbas

You have come this far—finished most of your dietetics classes, anxious to receive your verification statement, and ready to start the Dietetic Internship (DI) application process—if you haven't already. The question that still lingers in your mind is—do I get a Masters (MS) or not?

Now, as a dietetics student and registered dietitian (RD) in the making—you are fully aware that the application process includes a matching process—where you apply and rank your desired programs in the order of “please, please accept me and my life will be complete” to “at least I'll get in.” On the opposite end of this process are the DI Directors and their admission committees, who read your applications and, consequently, rank you among the range of other applicants. Please note the key point in this ritual: You **MUST** enroll in the first program that accepts you in your ranking order.

As one may decipher, this process requires thought, devotion, gusto, and contemplation. Thought—as you must be certain in your program choices and their ranking order (no drawing out of your hat here). Devotion—as you are making a commitment in taking the next step to becoming a RD. Gusto—as once you are ensconced in your internship, you better have admiration, love, and ambition for your career-to-be, because, as you will learn, there are inevitable highs and lows along the way. (No worries, this is totally normal and reassures the fact that you are human). Lastly, contemplation—as where you are matched will predict the course of your years to come on this planet (not to make you break a sweat or anything).

Basically, the programs you apply to and how you rank them is a BIG deal. The process requires you to take into account a slew of factors. I intend to provide you with the pros and cons of partaking in a combined MS/DI versus a DI program—both leading to the RD.

Let's begin with the cons, shall we? And, save the best for last.

First, a combined MS/DI program requires the ability to prioritize. You will have to make time for rotation homework and class work. These may not always overlap, it depends specifically on the combined program, but in 99 percent of all cases, there will come a time where you will have work to do for both your classes and DI. If you can't juggle the two, you will have a rough time. Furthermore, if you are working, involved in community service, or simply want to “hang” with friends, family, or your significant other, even more prioritizing will be required. Your best bet is to think of post-its, planners, calendars, and electronic Blackberry or iPhone reminders as your new best friends.

Secondly, in the words of Kelly Kane, the DI Director of Frances Stern Nutrition Center at Tufts Medical, “If you do a combined program, you must be able to think in two very different realms. For example, you could be taking a nutrition biochemistry class while starting your community nutrition rotation.” As one may infer, each requires very different skills, “know-how,” and most importantly, an ability to easily switch back and forth between your analytical left brain and your subjective, synthesizing right brain.

Thirdly, and most importantly, you simply may not want an MS in nutrition, as most combined MS/DI programs only offer the ability to earn a graduate degree in nutrition. You may not know what you want to earn your MS in. Instead, you may wish to do your DI, gain some experience, and acquire a MS in an area once you are absolutely certain the direction you want your career to grow, such as a Masters in Public Health (MPH) or Masters in Business Administration (MBA).

Lastly, combined programs are more expensive, take more time to complete, and force you to gain your MS in the same location where you did your DI. This is an approach that may not be good for all the adventurers out there who wish to take full advantage of every relocation opportunity.

Now for the pros, and there are quite a few.

First, you immediately get your MS done. In doing so, you have no opportunity to continue with a working life and “forget” to go back and get your MS. Also, once you’re done with your MS/DI program—unless you’re a real “go-getter” and opt for another MS—you are done with school (besides of course, the continuing education you need to maintain your RD status). Thus, you will never have to switch from the office to the classroom.

Second, you will immediately start off with a higher salary than your non-MS competitors. Check out the [American Dietetic Association’s \(ADA\) Interactive Salary Worksheet](#) to see this phenomenon for yourself. And, we all know that even though you shelled-out the extra dough to acquire your MS and may be staring at loans while biting your nails at the thought of repayment, your knowledge and title will pay off in the long-run.

Third, many RD jobs now require candidates to have an MS. And even though some positions may not require an MS, consider the fact that if you had two job candidates with equal strengths, but one had a MS, the candidate with the MS would have an immediate competitive advantage.

Fourth, in a MS program, you are exposed to a wider variety of nutritional possibilities, as you may venture into the classroom and take classes you were not able to take as an undergraduate. For example, a former dietetic intern in my program had no interest in nutrition policy whatsoever. However, once she was able to take a class focused on the subject, she became enthralled with this nutrition niche. She exposed herself to courses or subjects she was unable to take as an undergraduate, whether due to degree requirements or course offerings, and it paid off. Who knows—you may just find a new passion of your own.

Lastly, as clearly stated by Kelly Kane, “In a combined program you apply what you learn in the classroom in a timelier manner than in a traditional internship. Your experience in the classroom seeps directly over into the internship when it is combined.” This “attach-and-apply” method may be the perfect route of learning for some.

As you know, there are two sides to every stone—pros and cons to every aspect of life—even when it comes to deciding on a combined MS/DI program or DI program. Whether you decide on a combined program or not, the most important factor is that you spend sufficient time considering who you are, what you want, and make an informed ranking of your desired programs. Hopefully this article provides you with some food for thought.

Corinne Dobbas is a Dietetic Intern, MS Nutrition Candidate at Tufts Medical Center/Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. She can be contacted at cdobbas@gmail.com.