



Careers in Plant-Based Nutrition: Options for Action in an Emerging Field

By Micaela Karlsen, MSPH
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We need you. We have never before been faced with so much overweight, chronic disease, and associated emotional and financial ill effects of the standard American diet. We have much to do if we are to turn this situation around, and fortunately, many paths lead to positive change. If you feel an inner calling to get involved, responding effectively will both create personal fulfillment and allow you to make a crucial positive difference.

This article will discuss career options along five major paths—clinical practice, nutrition education, research, public health, and entrepreneurship. Let this information serve as inspiration and guidance in taking concrete steps toward creating the work you love. Your opportunity to live into your potential is the also the opportunity of the world to benefit from your contribution.

Clinical Practice

In the plant-based nutrition arena, the foundation of clinical practice is using nutrition for two purposes: (1) to treat patients who either suffer from or wish to prevent nutritionally controllable diseases, or (2) to help support their immune systems as they undergo conventional treatment for chronic or infectious disease. *Treatment* is the key word here—a clinician works with patients using nutrition as an intervention.

Patients may come to see you for a different reason, but as their health practitioner, you have an opportunity to deliver an extra diet-related message. In a clinical role, your job is to deliver specific behavioral advice. As their health practitioner, you are more likely to get through to them than a friend, a family member, or a book is.

The benefit of traditional clinical training is that it gives you a rigorous background in biological sciences—biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, biochemistry—and this training provides a strong foundation for your understanding of nutrition. At the same time, no accredited training program currently exists that focuses on plant-based nutrition, so you will

need to seek out your own plant-based education.

At the present time, the pursuit of traditional licensure allows physicians and dietitians to offer clinical nutrition advice in all 50 states. Current legislation actually prohibits nutrition practice by many other professions in many states. While many health practitioners may wish to give dietary advice, or may already be doing so, they should be aware that depending on the state they live in, there are certain legal risks associated with this. The website [Nutrition Advocacy](#) maintains up-to-date information on the laws governing clinical practice by state and by profession.

One challenge of typical clinical practice is that the fee-for-service model defaults to seeing one patient at a time—and this is difficult if each patient needs a full dietary overhaul. If you want to run a profitable business, you may want to consider using a group training model or perhaps partnering with a dietitian or nutrition educator to oversee group trainings.

Looking for some further education? In partnership with Cornell University's eCornell Inc. online certificate program, the T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies [online course in plant-based nutrition](#) offers 30 CMEs to physicians, nurses, and pharmacists. The Wellness Forum's [Diet and Lifestyle Intervention Course](#) also offers a comprehensive live-teleclass series on using nutrition as an intervention.

If you wish to transition to clinical practice from a different background, you may need to complete a post-bac program for [premed requirements](#) or [dietetic requirements](#) before you can apply to medical or grad school.

Nutrition Education

Nutrition education is distinct from clinical practice in that educators do not treat patients for disease. Nutrition educators may provide one-on-one, or more often group training, to educate children and adults about nutrition and health outcomes. It's important for educators to remain vigilant about not crossing the line between educating and treating. This is especially important for anyone pursuing health coaching or other professions

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whose scope of practice are not yet clearly defined. Again, the website [Nutrition Advocacy](#) can really come in handy.

One advantage of education is that group training, classes, and programs are a natural fit—which can potentially make the profession more financially sustainable for those running their own training programs.

Looking for some examples? Some nutrition jobs:

- A nutrition professor at a university or community college.
- A health teacher in an elementary, middle, or high-school setting.
- A curriculum developer for organizations with a nutrition-related mission.
- A hospital dietitian who runs group meetings with cardiac patients.
- A certified health education specialist who offers corporate presentations or special seminars in schools.
- A health coach who works with individual clients.

The training path is less clear cut, although people seeking a position in academia or medical education will share the need to learn about plant-based nutrition outside of their traditional education. Possibilities include traditional training in nutrition, exercise physiology, or health education; a public health degree; or any number of alternative, non-accredited programs, such as coaching training. Having a clear vision of what kind of lifestyle you want to lead is important in determining your educational path. Do you want to interact with a lot of people? Children or adults? Do you prefer live lectures? Teleseminars? Do you want to write? Develop educational materials?

Spending the time to visualize the life that would bring you the greatest personal fulfillment is essential. Once you have that in mind, it will be easier to see a path to your goal.

Research

Currently, only a handful of researchers are studying the effects of whole-food, plant-based diets. I hope we see some more in the coming years! Researchers' activities usually include conducting original studies and publishing papers in scientific journals. With the exception of government-funded researchers, those in

academia also usually have to write grants to support their studies and often their salaries. Teaching at the university level is a powerful way to influence the next generation of thinkers.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) both have ongoing research positions, and any university with a nutrition or public health department is a possibility.

In academic settings, more prestigious universities often facilitate greater access to grant funding; however, there is often more pressure to “publish or perish.” As government grant funding has diminished slightly in recent years, more research grants are taken from industry. The resulting potential for compromised objectivity is something to be mindful of. At the same, conducting original research can be immensely exciting, as you are discovering the information that will inform our views in the future. You get to answer the unanswered questions.

Looking for graduate programs? Check out the [American Society for Nutrition Graduate School Programs](#).

Public Health

Public health is a far-reaching field of practice that targets primary prevention—averting illness before it occurs, especially in programs targeting large populations.

Public health is one of the most versatile career paths, and an MPH (master of public health) or PhD degree in the field provides a wide range in scope of influence. There are opportunities for both international and domestic nutrition and food interventions. An MPH can be a transitional degree on your way to a career in nutrition research if you did not major in nutrition or a related field as an undergraduate. MPH graduates, compared to those with some other master's degrees, also have strong employment statistics, always a good thing after paying for a degree.

What might public health practitioners get involved in?

- An intervention to increase the nutrition knowledge and fruit and vegetable consumption of children.
- An international program to improve farming practices and provide training in underdeveloped countries.

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- Media/educational campaigns such as the “[Let’s Move!](#)” obesity initiative launched by U.S. first lady Michelle Obama in 2010.

Interested in learning more? Check out [WhatIsPublicHealth.org](#) and the [Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health](#) for some inspiration and ideas.

Entrepreneurship

Successful business ventures involve solving problems for many people at once. Plant-based entrepreneurs are pioneering solutions in the business, entertainment, and social media worlds, as well as monetizing their passion to deliver valuable products and services that will support their promotion of plant-based nutrition.

In developing the concept for your business, you may want to ask yourself:

- What problems does my market have?
- What do they really need?
- How can I solve those problems?

While you may be inwardly cringing at the thought of selling supplements, there are many examples of supplement-free plant-based businesses. Here are just a few:

- [Karelia](#)—a company offering plant-based corporate wellness intervention.
- [VeganJobs](#)—an information/directory site that connects job seekers with vegan employers.
- [VegNews](#) and [Vegetarian Times](#)—vegan-targeted magazines.
- [Vegtoons](#)—vegan cartoons.

You could also become a vegan personal chef or a vegan clothing designer, or you could launch a vegan catering company or a plant-based restaurant ... the sky is the limit!

Relevant training could entail formal education such as attending business school or obtaining other traditional degrees relevant to your area of interest. Or it might mean attending seminar-style trainings by successful entrepreneurs such as T. Harv Eker (Peak Potentials), Tony Robbins, or others.

The most successful entrepreneurs have the capacity to

assess their strengths as visionary, manager, or technician, and to partner with others whose skills and abilities complement their own.

The more people working to promote the consumption of a whole-food, plant-based diet the better; it is my personal hope that by the end of my lifetime a plant-based diet will be the new normal. We need your help to make that happen, in whatever way you are called to. As I move toward a career in research, I hope there will be ever-growing numbers of people to collaborate with.

Best wishes for your health, happiness, and professional fulfillment.