

Differences Between Professionals Who Took the School Foodservice and Nutrition Specialist (SFNS) National Credentialing Exam and Those Who Did Not

**Deborah H. Carr, PhD, RD, LD; L. Jane Boudreaux, PhD, RD;
Martha T. Conklin, PhD, RD; and J.T. Johnson, PhD**

ABSTRACT

Researchers applied a descriptive, causal comparative design to explore differences between school foodservice professionals who chose to take the American School Food Service Association's (ASFSA) School Foodservice and Nutrition Specialist (SFNS) credentialing exam (n=463) and those who did not (n=750). The participant sample was drawn from lists provided by ASFSA. Group One represented 100% of those who had taken the exam and Group Two was a random sample from individuals listed as ASFSA Level 3 certified. The return rate was 327 (71%) for Group One and 266 (35%) for Group Two, yielding a combined return rate of 49% (N=593).

Participants represented ASFSA's seven geographic regions. Both groups responded to a three-part survey developed by researchers to measure profile differences between the groups and explore reasons why the SFNS exam was or was not taken. Participants were predominantly white females. Group One was younger than Group Two and reported less years of tenure in their present job; however, both groups reported an average of approximately 17 years employment in the school food and nutrition profession. In addition to tenure, significant differences were found in education level, area of study for postsecondary education, involvement in education/learning activities, job title, ASFSA membership group, and age. The majority (83%) of those who had taken the exam had earned a Baccalaureate degree or higher. Both groups identified that their primary reason for choosing or potentially choosing to take the SFNS exam was to increase their knowledge. The number one deterrent viewed by both groups was not having the SFNS credential as a requirement for their present job. Eighty percent of Group Two respondents stated they were either undecided or had no plans to take the exam.

As differences existed between the two groups in various characteristics, researchers examined the likelihood of predicting whether a school food and nutrition professional would pursue the SFNS credential. The equation resulting from the analysis correctly predicted (83.5%) whether study participants would fall into Group One or Group Two. The results of the study indicated that those who had taken the SFNS credentialing exam possessed a higher degree of education than is required by the exam. This educational discrepancy increased the likelihood that school food and nutrition professionals would participate in the SFNS credentialing program. Marketing the SFNS credential to employers as an identifying competency for school food and nutrition professionals also would increase the value of the credential and possible participation rates.

INTRODUCTION

The American School Food Service Association (ASFSA) is the national organization for school food and nutrition professionals. The purpose of ASFSA is to promote the improvement of school nutrition programs and further the professional development of its members (Martin, 1999). In 1995, ASFSA conducted a survey to measure professional development goals and the results of the survey revealed a need to enhance the organization's certification program (Rigby, 1999). In 1998, ASFSA added a credentialing tier to the existing certification program. The credential is designated as the School Foodservice and Nutrition Specialist (SFNS). Individuals who are successful in passing the national SFNS exam are eligible to display the SFNS credential.

The SFNS credentialing program provides participants with the opportunity to improve their professional status by taking a national standardized exam that assesses those competencies required in school food and nutrition management positions (Conklin, Sneed, & Martin, 1995). Researchers at the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Applied Research Division, completed research that establishes underlying competencies (Gregorie & Sneed, 1994), knowledge, skills, and abilities for the director/supervisor positions in school food and nutrition programs (Carr, Cater, & Conklin, 1996). This research was used as the core competencies for the SFNS credentialing exam.

The purpose of this research was to determine if differences existed between those who pursued the SFNS credential by taking the exam and those who were eligible but did not take the exam, based on various participant characteristics (age, educational level, gender, ethnic origin, household income, continuing education preference, learning outcomes, and type of recognition received). Researchers also examined the likelihood of predicting participation in the SFNS credentialing exam.

Understanding the characteristics of those who have taken or are eligible to take the SFNS credentialing exam provides valuable insight into why individuals participate in the program. There are no logical boundaries to secure the fundamental nature of adults participating in education activities (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Characteristics such as age, gender, ethnic origin, occupation, education level, socioeconomic status, religion, marital status, community size, educational location, profession, position, and degree aspiration have been associated with the decision of adults to participate in continuing education activities (Boshier, 1991; Houle, 1961; Livneh & Livneh, 1999; Morstain & Smart, 1974). However, Houle (1961) emphasized that these factors cannot be treated independently, as they are often inter-related.

Henry and Basile (1994) reported that the level of formal education is the most important factor influencing participation in a professional development activity. Adults who have some college experience are more interested in professional development activities than are those with no college experience (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974), while those with poor educational backgrounds frequently lack interest in learning or do not have confidence in their educational abilities (Cross, 1981).

When education activities involve certification, licensure, or earning a college degree, participation begins to decline after age 34 (Carp et al., 1974; DeJoy, 1997). A commitment to professional development activities remain unvarying until age 50 when they enter a

maintenance phase (DeJoy, 1997; Morstain & Smart, 1974, 1977). DeJoy (1997) reported that adults 25-44 constitute the majority of all adult learners.

The relationship of income to participation seems inconsistent. Earlier studies indicated that individuals with a high household income are more likely to participate in professional development activities than those with low incomes (Carp et al., 1974; Houle, 1961). But Henry and Basile (1994) reported that income levels had little influence on participation decisions; however, their study population had little variation in this characteristic.

Young adults are more likely than older adults to mention costs related to professional development activities as a problem impacting their participation (Cross, 1981). Although cost is a factor, a bigger issue may be who pays for such activities (Henry & Basile, 1994); their results showed a negative impact on participation when the participants paid their own fees.

This body of literature in adult education provides the underpinnings for this study. Identifying the characteristics of the two study groups provides insight into what influences credentialing program participation decisions of school food and nutrition professionals. To date, no empirical research has been conducted to identify differences associated with school food and nutrition professionals' decisions to participate or not in the School Foodservice and Nutrition Specialist (SFNS) national credentialing exam process. This research approaches professional certification and the SFNS credentialing process as a commitment to excellence through continuing professional education.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers used a descriptive, causal comparative study design to investigate whether differences existed between school food and nutrition professionals who chose to take the ASFSA School Foodservice and Nutrition Specialist (SFNS) credentialing exam and those who were eligible to take the exam, but chose not to participate. The survey method was selected to identify differences between the two study groups, according to the works of Boshier (1991), Carp et al. (1974), Cross (1981), Houle (1961), Livneh and Livneh (1999), and Morstain and Smart (1974).

Participants for this study were drawn entirely from ASFSA lists of those who had taken the SFNS credentialing exam, those maintaining a Level 3 certification, and those who were eligible to sit for the SFNS exam. Group 1 was identified as those who have taken the SFNS credentialing exam and Group 2 was defined as those eligible to sit for the exam but who had not done so. Researchers surveyed 100% of those who took the exam (Group 1) at the time of the study (n=463). Group 2 (n=750) was randomly selected from the more than 5,500 names listed as ASFSA Level 3 certified but not SFNS credentialed. Group 2 was over sampled to allow for disqualification of those who failed to meet the education requirements of the exam. Participants were dispersed throughout the United States in ASFSA's seven geographic regions.

A three-part survey instrument was used to collect data. Part I and Part II measured incentives and deterrents to the individual's decision to participate in the SFNS exam. Part III explored group differences associated with the decision to participate in the SFNS credentialing exam

process. During the instrument development phase, researchers incorporated a content validation procedure and initiated a pilot test of the survey to assure validity and reliability. Researchers randomly selected seven state association presidents/designees and delegations (Florida, Iowa, Mississippi, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin) attending the 2001ASFSA Legislative Action Conference in Washington, D.C. to participate in the pilot test. Participants (N=80) reviewed the instrument for clarity, readability, and ease of administration, and reported no difficulty in taking the survey. The pilot test had an 86% return rate (N=69).

Data analyses were conducted on selected participant characteristics to determine profile differences between Group 1 and Group 2 for age, educational level, gender, ethnic origin, household income, method of earning continuing education, continuing education preferences, and learning outcomes. Frequencies, chi squares, and independent t-tests were performed on the survey data to explore group differences. The .05 level of significance was used for all statistical tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 593 surveys were returned for a combined response rate of 49%. Table 1 presents the profile characteristics of school food and nutrition professionals by groups. Survey participants were predominantly white females who were members of ASFSA and who identified the organization as their primary professional affiliation. Differences were found with regard to job title [X^2 (N = 580, df = 6) = 105.95, $p < .001$], with Group 1 predominantly choosing a title of foodservice director/supervisor and a greater percentage of Group 2 identifying themselves as foodservice managers. Sixty-nine percent of Group 1 reported their job title as foodservice director/supervisor and 61% confirmed their ASFSA membership group as Food Service Director/Supervisor/Specialist - District. The majority (78.1%) of Group 2 listed a job title of foodservice manager (42.6%) or foodservice director/supervisor (35.5%). Forty-five percent of Group 2 selected Foodservice Employee/Manager section as their ASFSA membership group, and 36.8% chose the Food Service Director/Supervisor/Specialist – District as their ASFSA membership section. Chi-square analysis indicated that there were no differences between Group 1 and Group 2 with regard to gender, ethnic origin, ASFSA membership, ASFSA as primary professional affiliation, and participation in credit or noncredit education activities.

Table 1: Profile Characteristics of School Food and Nutrition Professionals by Study Participants						
	Group 1 (n=318) Exam Taken		Group 2 (n=265) No Exam Taken		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Gender						
Female	296	93.1	251	94.7	547	93.8

Male	22	6.9	14	5.3	36	6.2
Ethnic Origin						
White	290	91.5	242	93.1	532	92.5
Black/African American	17	5.4	11	4.2	28	4.9
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.2
Hispanic	3	0.9	1	0.4	4	0.7
Asian	4	1.3	2	0.8	6	1
Other	3	0.9	3	1.2	6	1
ASFSA Member						
Yes	326	99.4	257	97.7	573	98.6
No	2	0.6	6	2.3	8	1.4
ASFSA Primary Professional Affiliation						
Yes	254	80.6	210	82	464	81.3
No	61	19.4	46	18	107	18.7
Participation in a Credit or Noncredit Education Activity						
12 months or less	285	90	221	87	506	88.5
12-24 months	18	6	16	6	34	34
25-36 months	5	2	7	3	12	2.1
More than 36 months	9	3	11	4	20	3.5
Job Title **						
Foodservice Director/Supervisor	218	69.2	102	35.5	320	55.2
Foodservice Manager	28	8.9	113	42.6	141	24.3
College/University	3	1	1	0.4	4	0.7
Nutrition Educator/District	9	2.9	2	0.8	11	1.9

State Agency	24	7.6	9	3.4	33	5.7
Industry/Sales	5	1.6	1	0.4	6	1.0
Other	28	8.9	37	14	65	11.2
ASFSA Member Group ***						
District	191	61	95	36.8	286	50.1
Major City	44	14.1	17	6.6	61	10.7
State Agency	29	9.3	17	6.6	46	8.1
College	6	1.9	2	0.8	8	1.4
Manager	27	8.6	115	44.6	142	24.9
Other	16	5.1	12	4.7	28	4.9
Highest Education Level ***						
Associate	50	8.8	52	9.1	102	17.9
Baccalaureate	79	13.9	54	9.5	133	23.3
Some Graduate	54	9.5	54	9.5	108	18.9
Masters	122	21.4	50	8.8	172	30.2
Doctoral	8	1.4	3	0.5	11	1.9
Other	3	0.5	41	7.2	44	7.7
Area of Study **						
Child Nutrition	17	5.5	20	9	37	7
Foodservice Management	53	17.2	50	22.5	103	19.4
Hospitality Management	12	3.9	10	4.5	22	4.1
Food & Nutrition	7	23.9	34	15.3	108	20.3
Culinary	5	1.6	6	2.7	11	2.1
Nutrition/Dietetics	67	21.7	32	14.4	99	18.6
Other	81	56.2	70	31.5	151	28.4
Involved in Education/Learning Activities ***						
Once a Year	4	1.3	28	11	32	5.6

Twice a Year	34	11	49	19	83	14.4
Quarterly	93	29	85	33	178	31
Once/ Twice a Month	125	39	67	26	192	33.4
At Least Once a Day	50	16	21	8	71	12.3
Not at All	0	0	4	2	4	0.7
Other	11	4	4	2	15	2.6
** p < .01 Chi Square						
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Differences were found with regard to education level [X^2 (N = 570, df = 5) = 63.98, $p < .001$], with 99% of Group 1 and only 48% of Group 2 having an associate degree or higher. Of the potential options listed on the survey in regard to area of study for postsecondary education, 68% of Group 1 and 65% of Group 2 identified food and nutrition, nutrition/dietetics, foodservice management, or child nutrition as their areas of study. Differences also were found in how often participants were involved in education/learning activities [X^2 (N = 575, df = 6) = 52.20, $p < .001$], with Group 1 being more involved than Group 2. Sixty-eight percent of Group 1 and 59% of Group 2 currently were involved in some form of education/learning activities from once or twice a month to quarterly. Differences also were found in the ASFSA membership section [X^2 (N = 571, df = 5) = 100.04, $p < .001$], with 61% of Group 1 identifying their membership section at the district director level, while 47% of Group 2 identified the manager level.

Table 2 presents the age, household income, and employment characteristics of the two study groups. T-tests were used to compare Group 1 and Group 2 for age, years employed in school food and nutrition, household income, and years employed in the present job. Significant differences were found only in age ($t = 4.67$, $df = 577$, $p < .001$) and the length of time in the present job ($t = 3.08$, $df = 573$, $p < .002$). Group 2 participants were older and have been employed in their present job longer than those in Group 1. The household income for Group 1 was greater than Group 2.

	Group 1 (n=280) Exam Taken		Group 2 (n=209) No Exam Taken	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Variable	M	SD	M	SD
Age in Years	48	7.99	52 ***	8.05

Years Employed In SFN Profession	17	7.69	17	7.79
Household Income	87,519	45,750	78,214	100,051
Tenure in Present Job	10	7.24	12 **	8.1
** p < .01 by t Test				
*** p < .001 by t Test				

Characteristics related to continuing education activities and preferences also were explored for Group 1 and Group 2. Both groups indicated that the main way they learned about the SFNS credentialing exam was through ASFSA mailings and informational brochures. Groups also identified meeting/conference attendance as the most desired form of continuing education.

Both groups identified a desire to increase their knowledge of the field as the primary reason for choosing or potentially choosing to take the SFNS exam. Fifty-two percent of Group 1 and 34% of Group 2 desired “instruction that incorporates new findings with future directions.” Fifty-nine percent of Group 2 and 49% of Group 1 preferred “instruction that enhances and extends their existing knowledge.” The third and fourth reasons listed on the survey were “instruction that introduces new topic or concept” and “instruction that is just for fun,” respectively.

Participation in the SFNS credentialing exam and consequent association in Group 1 or Group 2 can be predicted using discriminate function analysis ($X^2 = 292.281$, $df = 20$, $p < .001$). The analysis shows that the discriminate functions were significantly different. The higher the negative coefficient, the less likely an individual is to take the SFNS credentialing exam. Likewise, higher positive coefficients indicate an elevated possibility that an individual will take the exam. The negative coefficients are “having the SFNS credential is not required in my present job” (-.74), “the state agency approves Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for taking the SFNS credentialing exam” (-.305), and “studying for the SFNS credentialing exam provides an escape from job frustrations” (-.233). The positive coefficients are “the SFNS credential offers formal recognition of achievement at a national level” (.398) and “participating in continuing education activities influences the likelihood one is to take the SFNS exam” (.304). This model correctly classified and predicted Group 1 and Group 2 in 83.5% of the respondents.

The ability to make generalizations using the Group 2 study sample may be weak. Group 2 represents a random sample of those eligible to take the SFNS credentialing exam and provided a 35% rate of return ($n = 266$). However, there does not appear to be any evidence that the study sample would be different from other school food and nutrition professionals who are eligible, but have chosen not, to take the SFNS credentialing exam.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION

The SFNS exam represents a major commitment by ASFSA to provide a national credentialing program for career professionals working in the area of child nutrition. The program serves as the highest professional development tier in the ASFSA certification program and is a worthy

pursuit that defines the professional accountability of those possessing the credential. Earning the credential provides an opportunity to raise the bar of professional excellence for school food and nutrition professionals. Therefore, this research should be of value to ASFSA in gaining an understanding of those characteristics that predict the interest and success of new participants in the SFNS credentialing program.

The two study groups differed to the degree in which they responded to the survey that asked whether they had or had not taken the SFNS credentialing exam. These differences can be used by ASFSA to market the program to child nutrition professionals. One difference worthy of notice was that Group 2 reported an average age of approximately 52 years. Carp and colleagues (1974) and Dejoy (1997) reported a decline in participation in education activities involving certification, licensure, or earning a college degree as age increased. Therefore, a proactive approach would be to market the SFNS credential to school food and nutrition professionals in the early stages of their careers. Based on the strength of these findings, the ability to predict who would take the exam occurred 83.5% of the time. This information enhances and extends existing knowledge of the study groups and will support ASFSA's efforts toward providing and marketing professional development activities to school nutrition professionals.

The findings of the study only apply to the study population. The characteristics of future school food and nutrition professionals participating in the SFNS credentialing process may be different. Therefore, future research is needed to compare and contrast differences between those school food and nutrition professionals who were early adopters of the SFNS credentialing program and those who decided to participate in the credentialing process at a later date.

The field of child nutrition also would benefit from research designed to measure the effectiveness of a school food and nutrition program administered by an individual who has earned the SFNS credential. Exploring program outcomes associated with credentialed directors over an extended period of time would establish the value of those who have engaged in the credentialing process.

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BIOGRAPHY

Carr is a research scientist for the National Food Service Management Institute. **Boudreaux** is a professor at The University of Southern Mississippi, College of Health. **Conklin** is associate professor at the Pennsylvania State University, School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Recreation Management. **Johnson** is a statistician and associate professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, Center for Research and Support.

