



Laura Coats

Registered Dietitian Nutritionist

Education

B.S. in Secondary Biology Education
Mississippi State University

M.S. in Food Science, Nutrition and
Health Promotion
Mississippi State University

Ph.D. in Physiology and Biophysics
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Lagniappe:

A Little Something Extra

My primary motivation for my career is to improve the health and well-being of both women and children. I believe that dietary intake and lifestyle influence long-term health, and understanding the physiological influences of these factors can help develop interventions that can improve the long-term health of women and children.

Research Scientist

Laura E. Coats, PhD, RDN is an assistant professor and director of research in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Dr. Coats serves as a mentor to students, residents, and fellows at UMMC, and is interested in the influence of maternal nutrition on the long-term health of the baby.

Uniqueness of Career Journey

I began my education in hopes to become a biology teacher. However, in college, I always found myself interested in metabolic pathways and how macro and micronutrients influence long-term health. Thus, I pursued a master's degree in nutrition and became a registered dietitian shortly after I completed my undergraduate degree. Following my dietetic internship, I started a doctoral program in physiology and biophysics because, again, I was interested in the physiological role of nutrition in long-term health. In particular, I was interested in reproductive physiology because I was fascinated by the role of maternal health and diet on the outcomes of her baby. I completed a doctoral fellowship to further increase my skills as a basic scientist and metabolic researcher. I studied the association of obesity and insulin resistance. I believe that my training as a basic scientist and dietitian, allowed me to appreciate and understand how diet and metabolism influence health. My education and research interests provided me with an opportunity to begin a career as a research scientist in the area of OBGYN, and additionally, my training and education as a research scientist provided me with the opportunity to conduct, manage, and direct clinical trials in all areas of OBGYN at UMMC.

Skills Vital to Success in Career

I am a physiologist, but my main skill set unique to my current position is being a trained research scientist. I was approached for my role as a faculty member and director of research due to my overall education and training. Although my education and training are in reproductive physiology and nutritional physiology, I currently work in all areas of OBGYN research at UMMC. Our OBGYN department has five areas of specialized OBGYN physicians, and they have different knowledge, training, and skill sets than I do. My current role is to help these physicians effectively and efficiently conduct clinical trials in their specialty areas and identify meaningful outcomes with their individual projects. Yet, I also conduct my own research projects in my specialty area. Therefore, I am able to work in areas of my specialty and utilize my skills in other areas.

Best Advice to Someone Considering This Career

Take pride in working hard and be persistent. Your degree and career will not be given to you. Additionally, one should learn to enhance and appreciate micro-skills such as communication and teamwork. Throughout my educational training and early in my career, I had to learn to communicate effectively so that students and peers could understand and appreciate my projects and results. Another key to scientific and career success is collaboration with others. The majority of scientists and professionals do not know everything or have every resource, and working with others is essential to beginning and maintaining a successful career and pleasant work environment.

How the Field Has Changed Over Time

I believe that young research scientists are straying away from lengthy postdoctoral fellowships after the completion of a PhD. I think that fewer PhDs are following the traditional path of completing a fellowship and becoming an academic faculty scientist. More young people are moving towards fields in industry or entry-level jobs.

Projected Changes in the Future

I think fewer people are going to go into academic research positions because of funding issues at the state and national levels. Most academic research scientist positions are funded by state and national grants. Grant funding is becoming more limited. I think that people will begin to seek positions that are not dependent on grant funding.