

Evaluation of Undergraduate Equine Related Internship Experience by Students and Employers¹

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Abstract

Internships are one mechanism industry and educational institutions combine efforts to assist young adults in preparing for professional careers. To ensure internships served their intended purpose, student's perceived value of their internship experience was evaluated; employers evaluated the interns as well. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Animal Science undergraduate majors are highly encouraged but not required to complete an internship. Between 2007 and 2012, 18 students enrolled in an equine related internship. The type of equine operation ranged from horse training (n=7), equine focused veterinary clinics (n=6) and equine extension (n=5). Most students strongly agreed the learning plan and journal were beneficial and provided a structured, detailed, planned internship with specific goals and expectations. In a post-internship survey, students ranked highest: they learned new information (4.68 + 0.67), it was a beneficial experience (4.57 + 0.77) and new techniques/methods were learned (4.53 + 1.08). Also, they strongly agreed the experience provided them the opportunity to explore a potential career (4.61 + 0.70) and they had increased first-hand knowledge of careers available in their area of interest (4.11 + 1.13). Finally, supervisors rated all students very high on all competencies related to workplace abilities, interpersonal skills and professional conduct.

Introduction

The mission of the Animal Science undergraduate program at the University of Nebraska is to educate qualified, motivated students in the animal sciences which are equipped to succeed in professional animal agriculture careers. Academic programs strive to prepare graduates for continued personal and professional growth through life-long learning. They also aim to provide undergraduates experiences and training to develop interpersonal skills so they may become leaders in their various communities. University faculty collaborate with industry through internships to help prepare students for successful careers. Internship

experiences have been shown to provide students experiential learning opportunities to apply concepts, knowledge and skills gained through their undergraduate academic program to real world situations as they connect theory with application to the industry (Peffer, 2012). These experiences provide students invaluable opportunities for career exploration and exposure to various aspects of the industry.

The demographics of agricultural undergraduate students have changed over the past 20 to 25 years to include a greater number of students from urban and suburban backgrounds (Dyer, et al. 1996; McNamara, 2009; Scofield, 1995) who have diverse levels of experience (Lawrence, 1987; Pratt-Phillips and Schmitt, 2010). Also, many animal science departments have indicated an increase in students interested in companion animals and horses (Scofield, 1995; Moore et al. 2008; Peffer, 2011). With these changes and students lack of hands-on experience, internships are an even more valuable tool to enhance student's practical experiences and experiential learning. Even though a student's previous equine experience has been shown to have a minimal impact on their performance in introductory equine lecture classes (Pratt-Phillips and Schmitt, 2010), it is still critical for students to gain hands-on experience and technical skills to be marketable and credible in the equine industry. Furthermore, it has been recommended that students need exposure to real life experiences through off-campus equine internships to enhance their marketability in the equine industry (Jorgan and Herring, 2007). In an evaluation of a two-year equine degree program, Long and Morgan (2010) concluded that for students to be successful in equine industry careers, they needed hands-on experiences to enable them to apply course work to their careers.

To ensure internships served their intended purpose, this paper was prepared to determine student's perceived value of their internship experience as well as employer's evaluation of the interns.

¹This study was deemed exempt by the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board.

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Methods

Animal Science majors at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) are highly encouraged to complete an internship, but are not required. The UNL Animal Science internship program is highly flexible and students may participate in an internship experience during any semester. The number of credit hours earned is dependent upon the number of hours/weeks the student is engaged in the internship. Students can earn between 1 credit hour (3 weeks on site) or up to 6 credits for 60 weeks. Animal Science faculty are identified to mentor internship students in their areas of expertise. Students are ultimately responsible for identifying and locating their internship, however resources are available to locate internships which include UNL Animal Science website, Husker Hire Link, faculty advisors and previous industry contacts.

To receive credit for an internship, the student must 1) identify a faculty member as the instructor; 2) complete an Animal Science Contract form; 3) enroll in the internship course (ASCI 395); and 4) successfully complete all assignments as identified in the Animal Science Contract form. Each individual faculty instructor determines the means of assessment of each internship and basis for grade assignment. Consultation with an academic advisor and completion of an internship contract (<http://animalscience.unl.edu/ANSCUndergraduateFormsDirectory>) is required for each student. The contract identifies the supervisor, number of credits to be earned and includes a learning plan which is customized to the specific internship. Included in the learning plan are specific goals, objectives, a general description of the internship and specific requirements which must be completed such as a journal, oral presentation and summary paper. This learning plan provides the framework for the scope and intellectual growth expected of the student from the experience. The contract and learning plan are to be made available to the internship supervisor.

Students participating in equine related internships for course credit are required to 1) maintain a journal; 2) present a follow-up oral presentation; and 3) complete an evaluation. Throughout their internship experience, equine related internship students are expected to maintain a journal and document their daily duties, plus highlight special situations that occur. At the conclusion of the internship, a detailed report reflecting on their experience and value of the experience is submitted. Furthermore, an oral presentation followed by questions and answers is conducted for all students who participated in an equine related internship. Satisfactory completion of the report and presentation are required to earn academic credit for the internship.

At the conclusion of the internship, all equine students were asked to complete a paper-based survey to evaluate their experience and preparedness. The survey was designed using a 5 point Likert-type scale (5 = strongly agreed to 1 = undecided) with questions designed to assess students perceived benefits of the

learning plan, what they gained from the experience, how prepared they were, skills gained, etc. Additionally questions were directed on the specific type of internship the student had participated in such as extension, industry, teaching or research. In addition, students were provided the opportunity to respond to "open ended" questions related to how they became interested in the position, courses which benefited them, would they recommend this to others, how to improve the experience and did it meet their expectations.

A similar paper-based survey tool was developed for employers/supervisors to evaluate students at the conclusion of the internship. The survey was mailed to each employer and was designed to provide feedback by employers on the students professionalism, work habits, quality of work, strengths and weaknesses and if they were prepared for the position using a similar 5-point Likert-type scale (5 = excellent to 1 = poor). Also employers were provided the opportunity to respond to "open ended" questions related to if they would re-hire students, how the experience could be improved and did the students meet their expectations. Descriptive statistics were compiled for the results of both the student intern and employer surveys.

Results and Discussion

All University of Nebraska Animal Science students must enroll in 4 hours of "experiential learning" credit which can be earned in a variety of classes such as judging teams, teaching assistants, extension assistants, research assistants, study tours and internships. Between 2007 and 2012, 18 students enrolled in some type of equine related internship. The type of equine operation ranged from horse training (n=7), equine focused veterinary clinics (n=6) and equine extension (n=5). The average number of credit hours enrolled in was 2.33 and they ranged between one to four credits. All interns completed a contract and 100% indicated the responsibilities and requirements were clearly identified. Nearly all interns, 94.4% (n = 17/18) completed a written report and 72.2% (n = 13/18) gave an oral presentation at the conclusion of their internship. There were 5 students who participated in extension type internships which were under the direct guidance of UNL Animal Science faculty who worked daily with the interns. Thus, due to the nature of the internship and direct faculty supervision it was decided both the oral presentation and/or learning plan were not required to determine the final evaluation and grade.

It is the responsibility of the intern to communicate with their supervisor the designated requirements for them to earn academic credit when on the internship. Supervisors were asked to indicate if a student had 1) completed the learning plan; 2) kept a journal; 3) completed a post-internship paper; and 4) given an oral presentation. Of the 13 supervisors who responded to the evaluation survey, 69.2% (n = 9/13) indicated there were aware the intern had completed a learning plan. Furthermore, 84.6% (n = 11/13) indicated the students

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had completed a post-internship report, 83.3% (n = 10/12) were aware the students completed an oral presentation on their experience and 71.4% (n = 10/13) knew the students were required to maintain a journal throughout the internship.

Communication between supervisor and intern is vital to maintaining the educational aspect of internships. The goal of an internship is for the students to learn and grow and not to be just another “employee.” In response by employers on how to improve the experience, most indicated a greater understanding of the expectations of the employer and requested more feedback on what the students gained from the experience.

For the internship to capitalize on the learning potential and move beyond doing a “job”, internship programs require structure that ensures the work experience is combined with intentional learning that is both self-directed and self-reflective (Katula and Threnhauser, 1999; Ryan and Cassidy, 1996). The development of a customized, specific learning plan is key to ensuring this intentional learning for students (VonDras and Miller, 2002). It was reported by DeVuyst (2006) that developing specific learning objectives encourages more active participation in learning, assists students in clarifying individual goals and increases experiential learning. Also, the concluding oral presentation and final report guide the student reflection of the experience. Students identify the technical and social skills they used and/or acquired, previous academic knowledge that contributed to their success, plus areas they feel were inadequately prepared for (Peffer, 2012).

Most students strongly agreed the learning plan was a useful tool and it was beneficial in outlining what was expected of them during the experience (Table 1). Furthermore, students felt it was beneficial to maintain a journal throughout the duration of the internship (mean score = 4.68/5.0). These responses are in agreement with previously reported reflective internship surveys (Heinemann, et al., 1991; Ciofalo, 1989). These authors noted the importance of having a well-structured, detailed, planned internship with specific goals and objectives based on pedagogy of experiential learning. Also, Sterns, et al. (2005) indicated the importance of specifically identifying the role of the intern and outlining duties and responsibilities which challenge and engage the intern.

At the conclusion of the internship, students were asked to complete an overall self-reflective survey on what they gained from the experience, how prepared they felt they were for the internship and the benefits to career exploration derived from

the internship (Table 2). In regards to overall benefits of the internship, the highest mean scores were related to new information learned (4.68 + 0.67), the internship being a beneficial experience (4.57 + 0.77) and learning new techniques/methods (4.53 + 1.08). However, the scores for how much they learned ranged from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (undecided) indicating much variation between the internship experiences of the students. This broad range of scores may be related to the diverse background of the student interns and their amount of previous experience. Nearly half of the students employed at equine veterinary clinics and horse training facilities would be considered to have had a moderate to high level of hands-on horse experience whereas the other students would be characterized to have had minimal previous industry experience. Also, interns strongly agreed the experience provided them the opportunity to explore a specific career (4.61 + 0.70) and gain an increased understanding of various potential careers related to their interests (4.11 + 1.13). These results indicate the overall educational impact for students participating in an internship. Similarly, others have reported various tangible benefits for students that successfully completed internships such as higher starting salaries (Gault et al., 2000), greater job satisfaction (Divine et al., 2007; Gault et al., 2000), more post-graduation employment opportunities (Divine et al., 2007) and increased occupational related skills (Divine et al., 2007). Furthermore, other internship studies have indicated the experience to be highly valuable to students when making career decisions and the potential for full-time employment (Peffer, 2012).

These data indicate the internship experiences for equine students have been successful and effective and have added value to student’s educational experience. Furthermore, these internships have provided a link between theory and practice as indicated by students agreeing their academic program helped them

Table 1. Student Responses Regarding the Value of the Internship Assessment Tools (n=18)^z

	Mean ^y	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
The journal was beneficial throughout the experience period	4.42	0.74	3.0	5.0
The learning plan was a useful tool	4.40	0.74	3.0	5.0
The learning plan was beneficial outlining the expectations for the experience	4.33	0.82	3.0	5.0

^zSurvey responses listed in descending order of mean score.

^yScale used: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Moderately Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Undecided, 0=Does Not Apply

Table 2. Student Responses Regarding the Internship Learning Objectives (n=18)^z

	Mean ^y	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Much new information was obtained	4.68	0.67	3.0	5.0
This experience provided me greater career exploration	4.61	0.70	3.0	5.0
This was a very beneficial experience	4.58	0.77	3.0	5.0
New techniques/methods were learned	4.53	1.08	1.0	5.0
I chose this experience to broaden my experiences beyond what traditional courses can offer	4.53	1.03	1.0	5.0
I have a greater understanding of potential careers in this area	4.11	1.14	1.0	5.0
My academic program helped prepare for this experience	3.83	0.86	2.0	5.0
The instructor/coordinator helped prepare me for this experience	3.50	0.82	2.0	5.0
I was poorly prepared for this experience	2.00	0.00	2.0	2.0

^zSurvey responses listed in descending order of mean score.

^yScale used: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Moderately Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Undecided, 0=Does Not Apply

prepare for the internships (3.83 + 0.86) and they chose the experience to broaden themselves beyond traditional courses (4.53 + 1.03). Thus, the experience has provided experiential learning opportunities for students to apply concepts, knowledge and skills gained in their academic program to real world situations. Also, nearly all indicated their equine related internships were paid positions. It has been reported that students with greater technical skills and those perceived to be highly motivated often received higher internship salaries (Bennett-Wimbush and Amstutz, 2011).

Students that participated in off-campus equine industry internships (veterinary clinics, horse trainers, etc.) derived many benefits from their experiences (Table 3). Most indicated new skills were obtained (4.65 + 0.99), they could relate what they learned in their academic program to the industry (4.47 + 0.72) and they had the necessary skills required for the internship (4.29 + 0.92). Additionally, most indicated greater communication skills were developed (4.41 + 0.87). The equine industry internship students varied greatly in their previous experience. It could be speculated their diverse backgrounds had an influence on the benefits derived from the internship. Previous reports of equine related internships indicate they provide opportunities to gain experience and exposure to alternative industry practices, techniques and resources (Bennett-Wimbush and Amstutz, 2011). Similarly, Sterns, et al. (2005) reported the major benefits of a legislative internship were the application of course material to real-life experience, networking with various parties and acquiring new skills. Other interns have indicated increased maturity as they often work away from home and learn to live and work independently (Kirwan, et al., 2002).

Students who participated in equine extension internships were involved with multifaceted extension planning and implantation of workshops, contests and other equine events. They took leaderships and responsibility for planning events, developing resources and dealing with various issues as they arise. All students who participated in equine extension internships indicated a much greater understanding of the role of extension in providing education to horse enthusiasts (Table 4). Furthermore 100% strongly agreed their level of understanding of extension's role and delivery means was greatly increased through the internship. It was intended that the increased first-hand experience obtained during the internship encourages students to seek extension type

positions. Of the 5 interns responding to this survey, 4 did seek extension related positions following graduation. Similarly, undergraduate students participating in an extension forestry educational program unanimously agreed the internship was meaningful and they were highly interested in careers related to the environmental education and extension (Kirwan, et al., 2002).

Employers were asked to evaluate the interns on a variety of competencies related to workplace abilities, interpersonal skills and professional conduct (Table 5). Students were rated very high on all areas evaluated with ability to follow directions (4.89 + 0.32) and dependability (4.84 + 0.37) being the highest. Employer comments were very positive on all students and 100% indicated they would hire the student again and the students met with their expectations. Furthermore, all supervisors indicated the students were prepared to be successful in the internship.

Previous studies have reported both supervisor and student intern ratings between 4.2 and 4.8 on the 5-point Likert scale, with students consistently rating their performance higher than their supervisors rating (McDonough et al., 2009). However, Bennett-Wimbush

Table 3. Student Responses Regarding the Value of Equine the Industry Internships (n=13)^z

	Mean ^y	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
I learned new skills that will enhance my future career	4.65	0.99	1.00	5.00
I can better relate information in courses to the industry	4.47	0.72	3.00	5.00
I had the skills necessary to be successful in this experience	4.29	0.92	2.00	5.00
I developed greater communication skills during this experience	4.4	0.872	3.00	5.00

^zSurvey responses listed in descending order of mean score.
^yScale used: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Moderately Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Undecided, 0=Does Not Apply

Table 4. Student Responses Regarding the Value of Equine Extension Internships (n=5)^z

	Mean ^y	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
I have greater understanding of the leadership role of cooperative extension in providing education for youth and adults in the community	5.0	0.00	5.0	5.0
I developed an appreciation for how the state and county aspects of extension work together	5.0	0.00	5.0	5.0
I was responsible for planning extension programs/events	5.0	0.00	5.0	5.0
I helped conduct extension programs/events	5.0	0.00	5.0	5.0
I improved my communication skills during this experience	4.50	0.71	4.0	5.0
I assisted in the evaluation of extension programs/events	4.50	0.71	4.0	5.0

^zSurvey responses listed in descending order of mean score.
^yScale used: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Moderately Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Undecided, 0=Does Not Apply

Table 5. Employer/Supervisor Responses Regarding Workplace Competencies of Student Interns (n=18)^z

	Mean ^y	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ability to follow instructions	4.89	0.32	4.0	5.0
Dependability	4.84	0.37	4.0	5.0
Willingness to learn	4.74	0.45	4.0	5.0
Efficiency	4.72	0.46	4.0	5.0
Completeness of work	4.72	0.46	4.0	5.0
Completed duties/tasks in a timely manner	4.72	0.46	4.0	5.0
Work ethic	4.68	0.48	4.0	5.0
Quality of work	4.67	0.48	4.0	5.0
Openness to try new things	4.67	0.48	4.0	5.0
Creativity	4.60	0.60	3.0	5.0
Innovation	4.44	0.73	3.0	5.0

^zSurvey responses listed in descending order of mean score.
^yScale used: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Moderately Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Undecided, 0=Does Not Apply

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and Amstutz (2011) reported supervisors consistently rated student interns very highly in the areas of cooperation, supervisor acceptance, willingness to learn and acceptance by customers. Jogan and Hering (2007) indicated employers' ranked the most important qualities of potential employees as positive work ethic, honesty and selected hands-on skills. The excellent evaluation of interns in this study is similar to those of previous studies and indicates employers are very supportive of internship programs. Interns are an inexpensive means to train and evaluate potential future employees. They are affordable employees which are available seasonally and employers can encourage career minded, young professionals to enter a specific job market (Bennett-Wimbush and Amstutz, 2011). Callanan and Benzi (2004) assessed the completion of undergraduate internships and employment rates at graduation and found internships to be one of the most valuable experiences related to early career success. According to the National Association of Colleges and Universities (2014), the rate of full-time offers made to interns and co-op students has steadily increased with nearly 60% offers made in 2014. Furthermore, they reported former interns of an employer were more likely to remain with that company between 1 and 5 years.

Summary

The value of internships has been documented through numerous studies, yet, they appear to be even more important due to changing demographics and background of today's agricultural undergraduate students. Agricultural programs have an increasing number of non-rural students who desire careers in the equine industry. Additionally, employers have indicated a strong preference for students with "hands-on"/practical experience. Thus, students should be encouraged to participate in an internship to improve their marketability in the equine industry. This study further solidifies the benefits and needs for increased emphasis on students to participate in an internship experience.

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