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## The Role of Internships in Raising Undergraduates' Awareness and Perception of Extension

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## The Role of Internships in Raising Undergraduates' Awareness and Perception of Extension

### Abstract

Extension does not often reach out to undergraduates at their home institutions. Doing so might help Extension reach new audiences; leverage scarce resources; provide meaningful, community-based work experience; and perhaps recruit another generation of Extension professionals. We surveyed students who had completed internships with Extension programs to understand their motivations and to gauge impacts of their internships. Students' understanding of Extension increased exponentially over the course of their internships. They were highly motivated by having a paid work experience that allowed for making professional contacts. Survey feedback will be used to improve, coordinate and expand student opportunities in Extension.

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### Introduction

Nationwide, the Cooperative Extension System faces several important and related challenges: pressure to do more with fewer dollars, a need to increase the diversity of its employees to reflect the U.S. population, and a struggle to remain relevant and visible among an increasingly diverse, urbanized and wired public. National surveys conducted for the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities show that most young people are unaware of Extension in their state (Copernicus, 2009); even students at land-grant universities are often unfamiliar with the outreach and engagement mission of their schools.

Undergraduate students seek internships as a way to gain real-world experience related to their studies. Extension is in a good position to provide such experiences in diverse fields, and past successes have been documented (Muscio, 2011; Rogers, Mason, & Cornelius, 2001). Morris, Pomery, and Murray (2002) suggest that involving undergraduates in Extension activities can help to recruit the next generation of Extension employees.

At Oregon State University (OSU), the Professional and Managerial Internships in State Employment (PROMISE) program seeks to increase opportunities for historically under-represented populations in

state and local government by coordinating undergraduate internships (PROMISE, 2012). PROMISE interns work full-time for 10 weeks in the summer for their sponsoring agency. Half of each intern's stipend is paid by the sponsor, with the other half contributed by the OSU administration. Over the years, the OSU Extension Service has sponsored a handful of PROMISE interns, with at least one current Extension faculty member having originally been a PROMISE intern himself.

In 2011, with support from the PROMISE program and OSU Extension administration and with increased promotion of the PROMISE program to on- and off-campus Extension faculty, 13 PROMISE interns were placed with Extension/Outreach & Engagement Division sponsors, making up approximately one-third of the entire PROMISE cohort. Many other OSU students worked with Extension faculty outside the PROMISE program. Internship activities were diverse and spanned all program areas (Forestry & Natural Resources, Agriculture & Natural Resources, 4-H, Sea Grant, Family & Community Health). We anticipated that this engagement would ultimately result in numerous benefits for the students, the faculty sponsors, and for Extension as an organization. Among these, we were particularly interested in increasing understanding of the land-grant mission among students, building a more diverse pool of future Extension employees, and creating meaningful job opportunities for students in their home communities.

With a relatively large cohort (13) of Extension-sponsored PROMISE interns dispersed at many locations around the state, we worked with a coordinating intern to develop several tools to build community and promote discussion among these students. For one, we set up an online discussion board via the university's online course support system, Blackboard. Each week, a new discussion question was posted with the expectation that students respond briefly. The questions prompted students to reflect on their experience, on the Extension organization, and the community they were serving. The coordinating intern also set up and moderated a Facebook group for the interns.

## Methods

A 16-question survey was developed using the online tool SurveyMonkey. The survey used a combination of choice matrix and yes/no and open-ended questions and addressed the following areas: motivations and goals associated with taking the internship/job; awareness of Extension and the land-grant mission before and after the experience; attitudes toward Extension; and demographics. A subset of questions for PROMISE interns addressed the perceived utility of specific program elements.

The survey link was emailed to all of the 2011 PROMISE interns shortly after the program concluded, with a reminder email several weeks later. Additionally, the survey was sent to any OSU undergraduate students who were identified through various faculty members as having worked with an Extension office or program in the past 2 years. In total, 28 students received the survey, and 21 completed at least part of it, for a 75% response rate. We acknowledge that the relatively small sample size may limit the power of our study results.

## Results

Having a paid job, the opportunity to make professional contacts, and a chance to gain experience in the student's field of study were all very important motivations for students who worked with

Extension (Table 1). Open-ended responses bore this out, as exemplified by these answers to a question about the most important thing the student learned through his or her experience:

- "The connections made with other dietitians in the field."
- "Learning how to measure stream habitat and use the correct equipment."

Others noted that they gained important work and personal skills:

- "[I learned] how to communicate professionally."
- "[I learned] how to manage my time, and not get flustered when things come up last minute."
- "I learned to work as a team, and be able to communicate with others."

**Table 1.**

Factors in Students' Decision to Pursue an Internship with OSU Extension  
Service/Division of Outreach & Engagement (n = 18)

	<b>Not important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Very important</b>
The opportunity to make professional contacts	0%	17%	83%
Having a paid work experience	11%	11%	78%
Experience related to field of study/career path	6%	22%	72%
General work experience (not related to field of study)	11%	33%	56%
Having an internship/job close to home	18%	35%	47%

Students' understanding of Extension increased greatly over the course of their experiences. 71% of students said they had heard of the OSU Extension Service before their internship, but only 38% said that they knew what Extension did. After their experience, 100% of students responded positively to each of these questions. The percentage of students who said they "knew what a land-grant university is" increased from 46% to 77% following their internships.

Participating students had relatively positive perceptions of the value of Extension following their experience (Table 2). Interestingly, although there was a strong effort to engage the 2011 PROMISE interns in learning about OSU Extension and its programs, there was not much difference in these students' perceptions of Extension compared to other (non-PROMISE) interns or student workers (data not shown). Both groups (PROMISE interns and non-PROMISE interns) gave varied and fairly

accurate examples of the role of Extension in response to an open-ended question. The perceived value of Extension, as reported in Table 2, was also similar between the two groups.

**Table 2.**  
Students' Perception of Extension, as Reported Following their Internship or Work Experience (n = 13)\*

	<b>Value</b>
Extension is relevant to my life.	0.8
Extension is relevant to the lives of other members of my family.	0.5
Extension is relevant to most Oregonians.	0.8
I see a connection between the work of Extension and the other missions of OSU (i.e. teaching and research).	0.8
A career in Extension would be appealing to me.	0.6
Extension is a trustworthy source of information.	0.9
Extension improves the quality of life of those who use its services.	1.0
*Values are reported as average of responses where "strongly disagree" = -1.0; "slightly disagree" = -0.5; "slightly agree" = 0.5; "strongly agree" = 1.0; hence a positive value indicates agreement with the statement and a higher value indicates stronger agreement.	

Among the PROMISE interns, day-to-day internship experiences and interactions with other interns were the most important contributors to students' understanding of Extension. The online discussion forum (Blackboard) was also important, but to a lesser degree (Table 3). Many OSU courses use the Blackboard forum tool, but within the PROMISE program, not all interns participated in the forum because it was not mandated.

**Table 3.**  
Contributing Factors to Students' Understanding of Extension and the University's Outreach and Engagement Mission (n = 7)

	<b>Did not contribute</b>	<b>Contributed some</b>	<b>Contributed a great deal</b>
Day-to-day internship activities	14%	29%	57%
Meeting, networking and socializing with other interns	14%	29%	57%
Online discussion forum	29%	43%	29%
Guest speakers	29%	57%	14%

PROMISE Facebook group	29%	57%	14%
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## Discussion

Our survey found that students' experiences with Extension promoted awareness and a positive impression of Extension and its role within both the university and the community. Students' impressions of Extension as a career choice were also positive, but less strongly so. Previous interactions and relationships with Extension have been shown to be a significant factor in current agents' decisions to pursue Extension careers (Arnold & Place, 2010), but such careers are clearly not for everyone. We believe that increased Extension engagement with undergraduates can help those who might consider a career in Extension have a more realistic expectation of Extension work.

Connected Extension-undergraduate activities take many forms, from entire service learning-based courses (Curtis & Mahon, 2010; Morris et al., 2002) to individual job or internship placements (Meloy, 1998; Rogers et al., 2001). Extension's PROMISE interns came from diverse academic backgrounds, and have had equally diverse internship experiences, for example:

- A Human Development & Family Sciences student worked on a nutrition curriculum to be used in public schools targeting Latino/Latina audiences;
- A New Media Communications student co-created a multimedia learning module;
- An Interior Design student helped plan and implement a participatory mural project at the State Fair;
- A Pre-Pharmacy student compiled information about pharmaceuticals in water.

Despite these successes, many barriers still exist with respect to increasing both the number and impact of undergraduate-Extension connections. For example, at OSU, it proved to be logistically challenging to connect students in a campus-based internship program to internship sites in sometimes-distant county Extension offices. Designing a program that looks beyond the college campus at the outset might help to improve the experience of both the intern and the mentor. Synchronous distance learning technologies (Skype, livestream video, etc.) could be one method to connect interns with campus based professional development activities.

Wilken, Williams, Cadavieco, and Walker (2008) provide strategies for developing positive internship experiences for both students and Extension agents. However, Extension faculty are stretched thin, and many cannot devote the time needed to be an effective mentor, let alone the money to sponsor a paid intern. Off-campus faculty may not have a strong connection to campus academic departments, and thus recruitment of potential students may pose a challenge. Future research could examine the motivations and perceived incentives and barriers for mentoring undergraduate interns, from an Extension agent's perspective. We are especially interested in establishing and strengthening partnerships between campus-based specialists and off-campus Extension agents to design and implement internships and service-learning projects that connect service and learning related to the student's field of study (Simpson, 1998).

Universities are increasingly adopting service learning as a pedagogic tool (Robinette & Noblet, 2009; Zlotkowski & Duffy, 2010). This is particularly important at OSU, which in 2010 was designated as a Community Engagement institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2011). Morris et al. (2002) note that even at engaged institutions, campus-based community outreach programs and Extension programs may conduct similar activities without coordination. National studies of faculty and administrator perspectives on service learning show that one barrier to service-learning initiatives is establishing and maintaining successful relationships with agencies and organizations off campus (Welch, Liese, & Bergerson, 2004). Extension is uniquely positioned to help campus-based faculty to be successful in this regard. With program areas spanning many disciplines, Extension has the potential to offer community-based opportunities in the context of a student's academic discipline that also provide an authentic service to the community (Kriesky & Cote, 2003; Morris et al., 2002). Making the most of this potential requires a commitment from Extension faculty, administrators, and students' academic programs.

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