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Exit Surveying of Interns: Demonstrating Impact on Young Professionals

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Exit Surveying of Interns: Demonstrating Impact on Young Professionals

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Abstract: Documenting impact is becoming increasingly important as funding becomes tighter for Extension programs. An exit survey for interns conducted via an online survey tool is an opportunity to collect information on knowledge and skill gains, as well as document changes in intentions and attitudes about future career paths. An exit survey conducted between 2006-2010 demonstrated increases in knowledge and skills related to coastal science. In addition, the internships enabled students to better define their career goals. There are many activities that we routinely participate in that could benefit from this type of impact data collection in addition to routine evaluation.

Introduction

Interns from partnering universities, schools, or organizations increase our ability to work on multiple projects while providing young professionals with relevant work experience. While it is possible to simply document the training of these interns and the projects they complete, collecting further data can help demonstrate the value of Extension programming and show impact on these young professionals. The survey described here was developed not only to assess the satisfaction of interns with their experience to improve future internships, but to document increases in their knowledge and skills at a variety of levels and the impact of their learning about real world careers.

Methods

A 10-question survey was developed and administered using the online, freeware survey tool SurveyMonkey (Surveymonkey.com, 2010), to maximize ease of data collection with the student demographic and minimize costs (Archer, 2003). The survey URL was linked through emails sent to all previous interns in 2007 and in 2010.

The majority of questions asked students to assess their responses post internship, although two specific questions asked them to rate their pre-internship experiences in a post- then- pre format. The survey was divided into five sections, two expository sections introducing and completing the survey, and three question-based sections. The survey questions were divided up by internship content, internship experience, and demographic information.

By using choice matrix questions with items in multiple lines, a wealth of information was generated with relatively few questions. For example, the post/pre interest question allowed them to select their level of interest in several subject areas before and after their internship (Table 1). Similarly, their acquisition of or improvement in eight different skills was assessed in one question. The last survey question was an open text box asking students to describe how they would use what they learned in their future career or life. The complete survey can be downloaded from <<http://ocean.njaes.rutgers.edu/marine/internsurvey.pdf>>.

Table 1.
Self Reported Changes in Interest by Topic, as Percentages.(n=9)

Question	Response Scale			
	None	A Little	Some	A Lot
Pre Internship Interest				
Ecology	0	44	33	22
Engineering	56	11	22	11
Environmental Studies	0	11	33	56
Marine Biology	11	44	11	33
Education	44	22	33	0
Other Biology	11	22	44	22
Chemistry	11	11	33	44
Public Policy	22	56	11	11
Post Internship Interest				
Ecology	0	11	33	56
Engineering	44	0	33	22
Environmental Studies	0	0	0	100
Marine Biology	0	33	22	44
Education	11	22	44	22
Other Biology	11	22	44	22
Chemistry	11	11	33	44
Public Policy	11	44	11	33

Results

Twelve interns have completed internships since 2006, not including three students who began in the spring of 2010. Nine students have currently completed the survey (75% response), which is a higher response rate than expected for an impact evaluation (Archer, 2008). The survey showed significant knowledge gains regarding local coastal water issues (77% increase), particularly nonpoint source pollution (66%), water

quality (44%), bacterial pathogen monitoring (56%), and shellfish restoration (56%) resulting from their internship. In addition, students acquired skills in Geographic Information Systems (33%) and project management (33%), and 80% reported improving their skills in the following diverse areas: writing/editing, databases/spreadsheets, field sampling techniques, laboratory analysis, development of educational materials, and presentation/teaching skills (Figure 1).

All participants agreed or strongly agreed that the internship was a positive and valuable experience, and 90% stated that they intended to use the knowledge and skills they gained in their future or career (Figure 2). The interns all self reported increasing interest in ecology, public policy, education, marine biology, and environmental studies after their internships (Table 1).

While approximately 65% of respondents said they were more certain they wanted to pursue a career in this field, nearly 40% were either less sure or had decided to pursue other areas (Figure 2). This indicates the unique ability of an internship to show a student the reality of particular jobs, which may or may not meet their preconceived expectations. Having an experience that shows a student what they are not interested in can be just as crucial to their future choices as having their ideas reaffirmed by their experience. This is further highlighted by the open-ended question response, "While I am not certain that I will continue with the exact research conducted during the internship, I learned very much in the fields of Environmental Science and Public Policy, as well as inter-personal and written communication skills which will most definitely be useful in my future."

Figure 1.
Percent of Respondents that Acquired or Improved Skills in Various Areas

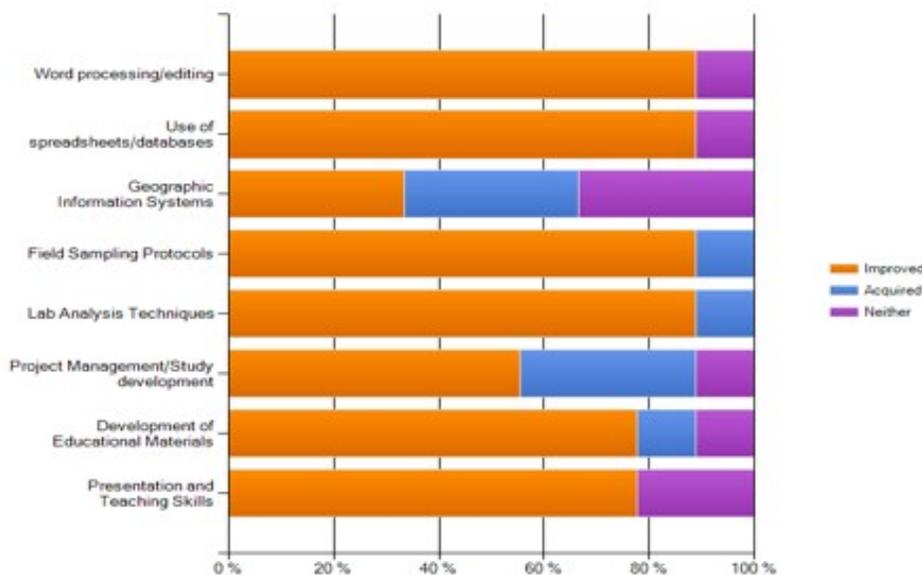
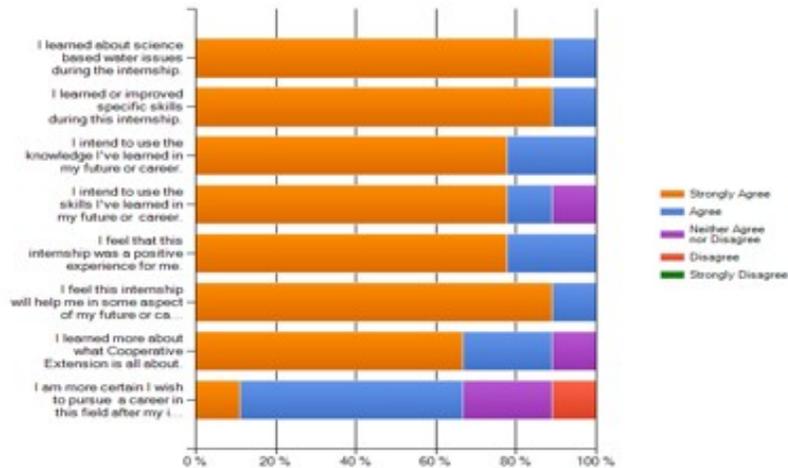


Figure 2.
Percent Agreement of Respondents with Knowledge and Intention Statements Based on a Likert Scale



Conclusion

There are opportunities for Extension personnel to collect more impact data from our conventional activities if out-of-the box thinking is employed. Web surveys in particular are an easy and potentially free way to gather data that demonstrate the effectiveness of our interactions, whether with stakeholders, clientele, staff, or interns (Archer, 2003). Surveying interns about the knowledge and skills they gain, how their interests develop and change, and their plans for the future can provide information about the impact Extension personnel are having on the future leaders within their own, or in other fields. The information is easy to collect from this audience with Web and email tools and can increase the significance of activity and impact reporting, as well as provide internal data about the effectiveness of Extension activities.

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