Building Career Readiness through Internships: Implications for Extension Education

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Introduction/Need for Research

The USDA has estimated that 60,000 highly technical job openings in food and agriculture are expected annually with only 35,000 available graduates (USDA, 2015). Workforce preparation is needed to solve significant food and agriculture challenges that are close at hand (Mercier, 2015). Research indicates that college graduates in food and agriculture need greater soft skills (often referred to as 21st century skills): critical thinking, strategic planning, teamwork, communication, leadership, problem-solving, self-management, and professionalism (Easterly, Warner, Lamm, & Telg, 2017; Stripling & Ricketts, 2016). Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) have identified eight career readiness competencies: critical thinking/problem solving; oral/written communications; teamwork/collaboration; digital technology; leadership; professionalism/work ethic; career management; global/intercultural fluency; and adaptability. Unfortunately, college students often lack internship opportunities to develop or refine these competencies. Internships can be particularly helpful at understanding career pathways, gathering information, and making career decisions (Jackson & Wilton, 2015). Internships, and scholarly work that expands our understanding of internships, are important for supporting students and professionals at all career levels (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016). Extension internships are particularly useful in promoting Extension as a career and developing a positive perception of Extension community engagement (Angima & Gaebel, 2018; Grotta & McGrath, 2013; Johnson, Vera, Irvin, & Elliott, 2019; Wilken, Williams, Cadavieco & Walker, 2008). However, limited research has been conducted to examine using internships to create Extension career interest among college students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on experiential learning theory (ELT). According to ELT, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). John Dewey introduced this notion of education through hands-on engagement as a transformative learning experience. According to Dewey (1897), "education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience" (p. 79). Many educators contributed to develop the concept of experiential learning (Kolb 1984; Freire, 1974; Lewin, 1951). According to Kolb (1984), learning occurs when a learner is exposed to a concrete learning experience that will lead to reflective observation of the experience. This reflective observation contributes to abstract conceptualization of the learning experience and internalization of the new experience. Finally, the learner will be able to apply the internalized knowledge and move into the active experimentation stage. Well-planned internship programs are based on the Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model and facilitate the learner to move through the four steps of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation).

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine the effect of the Extension internship program for building job skills and creating an interest in Extension careers.

Methodology

This was a survey research conducted with a group of college interns employed in [state] Cooperative Extension in 2019 summer. This Summer Internship Program seeks to engage college students to serve as Extension interns with these overall program goals: to gain skills, knowledge, and interests of Extension careers; to develop rich work experiences; and to help deliver Extension programs. NC State Extension selected 31 college students for the internship program. Following a one-day orientation to Cooperative Extension, each intern was assigned to a county Extension office for 10 weeks. We developed a survey instrument to collect data for achieving the research purpose. The survey focused on the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) eight career readiness competencies. A sample question was: "The internship experience provided me the opportunity to develop my skills in critical thinking/problem solving," and responses were: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*agree*), and 4 (*strongly agree*). The questions included the National Association of Colleges and Employers core competency descriptions, and students were asked to provide examples. Using a retrospective post-then-pre design, students rated their interest in pursuing a career in Cooperative Extension and pursuing a graduate degree in Agricultural and Extension Education after and before the internship. Responses were: 1 (*not at all interested*), 2 (*slightly interested*), 3 (*moderately interested*), 4 (*very interested*), and 5 (*extremely interested*). Data were collected at the end of the internship program. Of the 31 interns, 22 interns completed the survey for a 71% response rate.

Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

More than 90% of the interns agreed or strongly agreed that they developed the eight National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) career competencies as part of the Extension internship program. Most of the examples students provided of how they developed these competencies were related to oral/written communications, and interns reported a broad set of activities: preparing electronic newsletters; interacting with Extension colleagues, clients, and stakeholders outside of the office; addressing questions received via phone; building relationships and working with the general public; and creating educational presentations for various audiences. The percentage of interns who were very or extremely interested in pursuing a career in Extension increased from 36% before the program to 68% after completing the program. The percentage of interns who were very or extremely interested in pursuing a graduate degree in Extension education increased from 36% before the internship to 45% after completing the internship. This heightened career interest is further confirmed by four interns (13%) enrolling in the Extension Education academic minor after completing the internship.

Extension internships are effective in building job skills and creating an interest among participants in Extension careers. Therefore, educators should use Extension internships to develop Extension-related job skills and career interests of potential students. Researchers and educators have well-documented the use of internships for building knowledge and skills. However, limited research has addressed using internships for creating a career interest in Extension Education. The contribution to fill this knowledge gap is the major implication of this study. Based on the findings of this study, we recommend future research to further explore the effect of experiential learning in changing participants' belief and value system (career interest).

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