

# Perceptions of the Impact of an Equine Program on Student Satisfaction and Retention

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## Abstract

The objective of this study was to assess the personal and educational impact of an equine program on students at Southern Utah University (SUU). A survey was developed with statements to be evaluated on a Likert-type scale with five response levels. The survey was distributed to students enrolled in equine courses during three consecutive semesters. A total of 163 students voluntarily completed the survey, which included students of various horse experience, majors, and class standing. Students expressed their strongest agreement with items related to gaining new knowledge ( $P < 0.01$ ), followed by items related to providing personal benefits. Students also agreed equine courses helped them develop skills and had a favorable impact on their education at SUU. Almost one-half (47.1%) of the students indicated the horse program had influenced their decision to attend or remain at SUU, and 98.8% of students agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the courses to others. More than one-third of students also expressed interest in an equine science degree or minor. It has been concluded from the survey results that equine courses have a favorable impact on students through personal and educational value, and they strengthen the educational experience at SUU.

## Introduction

In a competitive world where students are torn between a variety of activities and interests, schools must continue to seek ways to increase the quality of instruction and improve the overall educational experience. Recruiting students is a continual challenge as is keeping students in school once they start. Numerous researchers have investigated the challenges of retention and recruiting (Jackman and Smick-Attisano, 1992; Mallory and Sommer, 1986; Manderscheid, 1988). Most researchers agree that highly satisfied students are more likely to remain in school and ultimately graduate. Providing a positive learning environment, one that builds confidence and increases skills and knowledge has been shown to improve retention rates in institutions of higher education (Elliott, 2003). Colleges with higher satisfaction levels enjoy improved retention and graduation rates, lower loan default rates and increased alumni giving (Miller, 2003).

Successful institutions realize that it is important to identify factors that enhance student satisfaction and focus on those factors (Elliott and Shin, 2002). A variety of factors influence and contribute to student satisfaction. As students expand their knowledge and experience level, new and exciting opportunities are opened to them. Elliott and Healy (2001) identified a variety of components that impact students' educational experiences. They determined that the quality of classroom interaction and positive feelings about their classes, connection with faculty, and a sense of fitting in increased the level of fulfillment in the educational environment. Understanding what keeps students satisfied improves retention rates and creates a more sustainable campus environment (Elliott and Shin, 2002).

The agriculture program at Southern Utah University (SUU) currently offers various equine related courses, including Horse Production, Horse Science and Industry, Beginning Horsemanship, Intermediate Horsemanship, and Advanced Horsemanship. Students from a variety of backgrounds and majors enroll in these courses. A number of benefits and opportunities from horses and horse riding have been recognized. The horse industry is a major contributor to the U.S. economy, with an estimated direct economic effect of \$39 billion annually and estimated employment impact of 1.4 million jobs (American Horse Council, 2005). Numerous physical, mental, and emotional benefits have been observed in those working with horses (Bizub et al., 2003; Brickell, 2005; Smith et al., 2006). Limited information has been obtained to quantify the effect the equine program at SUU could have on students and their educational experience at SUU. Understanding students' views of the equine program will be useful to strengthen the program and improve the educational benefits for students. The objective of this study was to assess the perception of undergraduate students regarding the impact an equine program has on the overall educational experience as well as potential impact on life skills.

## Materials and Methods

A survey tool was developed consisting of basic demographic information, statements for response on a Likert-type scale with five levels (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree), and an open-response

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question regarding how the student changed from taking the course. The paper and pencil survey was distributed to all students enrolled in all equine specific courses during each of three consecutive semesters. The surveys were given out with the final exam each semester, and then handed back separately so students were not required to take the survey. Some students were enrolled in more than one equine course over the three semesters; however only one survey was completed per student regardless of how many classes they took. A total of 163 different students voluntarily completed the survey.

Data were analyzed using the SPSS version 13.0 for Windows. Distributions of responses were compared using chi-square analysis. Mean responses were compared using one-way analysis of variance.

## Results and Discussion

A summary of the demographic data for survey respondents is displayed in Table 1. Students were predominantly female, non-agriculture majors, with limited riding experience. Since students from several majors outside agriculture enroll in equine courses, there is the potential to have an impact on a variety of students across campus. A necessary component of the equine classes, particularly the horsemanship classes, is interaction with other students and with the instructor. As students interact with each other relationships are developed which increase satisfaction in the overall educational experience.

The most common source from which students found out about the horse courses was family or friends. It appears from this data that word-of-mouth is an important recruiting tool for these courses. The courses are likely to be recommended to others by those who know about them. The average age of respondents was 21.9 years, ranging from 18 to 61 years of age. A number of non-traditional students are attracted to the courses each year, providing a broad base of experience and exposure.

Overall, students expressed their strongest agreement ( $P < 0.01$ ) with statements related to gaining new knowledge, followed by statements related to providing personal benefits. More than 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the statements related to gaining new knowledge (Table 2). These results provide indirect evidence that the academic objectives of these courses

**Table 1. Demographic Summary of Students that Completed the Equine Program Survey**

Demographic	%
Gender	
Female	76.5
Male	23.5
Major	
Agriculture	17.9
Science (Non-agriculture)	23.8
Other	58.3
Riding Experience	
Beginner	46.3
Intermediate	31.5
Experienced	14.8
Advanced	7.4
Class Standing	
Freshman	29.4
Sophomore	24.4
Junior	23.1
Senior	19.4
Other	3.8
How did you find out about this class?	
Faculty/Advisor/Class	13.5
Catalog	29.1
Family/Friend	54.7
Other	2.7

**Table 2. Summary of Responses to Survey Statements Focused on Knowledge Gained from Participation in Equine Courses**

Statement	n	Response, % <sup>z,y</sup>					Mean Response
		1	2	3	4	5	
The Horsemanship classes at SUU have helped me develop a better understanding of horses and horse behavior.	161	0.6	0.0	0.6	16.8	82.0	4.80
Horsemanship classes have helped me to realize the responsibility that goes along with owning a horse.	161	0.6	0.6	6.8	13.7	78.3	4.68
Horsemanship has been a valuable learning experience for me.	161	0.6	0.0	1.9	11.2	86.3	4.83

<sup>z</sup> Respondents used the following Likert-type scale:

1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.

<sup>y</sup> Chi-square analysis for distribution of responses  $P = 0.048$ .

**Table 3. Summary of Responses to Survey Statements Focused on Personal Benefits Obtained from Participation in Equine Courses**

Statement	n	Response, % <sup>z,y</sup>					Mean Response
		1	2	3	4	5	
Horsemanship has been a stress reliever to me.	163	1.8	1.2	4.9	24.5	67.5	4.55 <sup>a</sup>
The experiences I have had while taking Horsemanship have helped me to overcome my fears.	162	4.9	7.4	15.4	25.9	46.3	4.01 <sup>b</sup>
I am a more confident person after learning to work with my horse.	163	0.0	1.2	8.6	23.9	66.3	4.55 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>z</sup> Respondents used the following Likert-type scale:

1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.

<sup>y</sup> Chi-square analysis for distribution of responses  $P < 0.001$ .

<sup>a,b</sup> Means with different superscripts within column differ by one-way ANOVA at  $P = 0.001$ .

are being accomplished. There was also broad agreement among respondents with all statements related to obtaining personal benefits (Table 3). Agreement was greatest with respect to the equine courses providing stress relief and increasing self-confidence ( $P < 0.01$ ). Considering the many pressures associated with attending college, opportunities for stress relief and building confidence are important.

Students also agreed they developed new skills through participating in the equine courses (Table 4). Of the statements related to skills, they expressed their strongest agreement ( $P < 0.01$ ) with the statement referring to developing physical skills. Other statements referred to transferable skills of communication and problem-solving. Of these,

students expressed more agreement ( $P < 0.01$ ) with the ability to apply reasoning and problem-solving skills they learned to other areas of their education and life. These transferable skills are often included in the outcomes objectives of academic programs. Equine courses appear to be one effective method through which these objectives may be accomplished. These results agree with the findings of Smith and colleagues (2006), who demonstrated teaching horsemanship skills promoted the development of numerous life skills in youth. Brickell (2005) also noted achievements in riding horses promote emotional and physical responses that can improve management skills in life beyond riding. In addition, developing the ability to guide a horse encourages decision making and independence.

Students strongly agreed that equine courses had a positive impact on their experience at SUU (Table 5). Over 95% of the student respondents felt taking equine courses improved the quality of their educational experience, and most students agreed the equine program could attract students to SUU. With less than 20% of the respondents majoring in agriculture, these results indicate horse related courses are improving the quality of the educational experience for students in many academic programs across campus.

The results also show 47.1% of students indicated the horse program influenced their decision to attend or remain at SUU (Table 5). This strongly indicates the impact of the equine classes, especially noting these courses were not required for any degree at the time of the survey. Satisfaction of students with equine courses was also evident in that 98.8% of students agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the courses to others. This is consistent with the fact that most students found out about the courses through the recommendation of a friend or family member. Alumni of the Colorado State University Equine Science Program similarly expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their equine program. They also indicated they would recommend the program to others, even though many of

those alumni were not employed in the equine industry (Denniston and Russell, 2007).

The survey also contained statements to assess the interest of students in obtaining a degree or minor in equine studies. Over one-third of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they were interested in an equine related degree or minor (Table 6). Interest in an equine degree was found to be associated with riding experience, with the most experienced riders expressing the greatest interest ( $P < 0.01$ ). After sorting the responses by riding experience, 93.7% of advanced riders, 63.8% of experienced riders, 43.6% of intermediate riders, and 16.0% of beginner riders agreed or strongly agreed they were interested in an equine degree or minor. These results would be anticipated because individuals that are interested in equine studies and horsemanship would be most likely to have some riding or other horse experience. There also remains an obvious strong interest in the horse classes from less experienced riders, even those not seeking a degree.

When students were asked how they had changed because of the class, the most common responses

**Table 4. Summary of Responses to Survey Statements Focused on Skills Developed from Participation in Equine Courses**

Statement	n	Response, % <sup>z,y</sup>					Mean Response
		1	2	3	4	5	
Riding horses has helped me improve skills such as balance, timing, and coordination.	163	0.0	1.2	6.1	21.5	71.2	4.63 <sup>a</sup>
Learning to understand and communicate with my horse has improved my ability to interact and communicate with other people.	161	2.5	5.0	32.3	35.4	24.8	3.75 <sup>c</sup>
I can apply reasoning and problem-solving skills learned in Horsemanship to other areas of my education (and life).	161	0.6	2.5	21.1	41.6	34.2	4.06 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>z</sup> Respondents used the following Likert-type scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.  
<sup>y</sup> Chi-square analysis for distribution of responses  $P < 0.001$ .  
<sup>a,b,c</sup> Means with different superscripts within column differ by one-way ANOVA at  $P = 0.001$ .

**Table 5. Summary of Responses to Survey Statements Focused on the Influence Participation in Equine Courses had on Students' Education**

Statement	n	Response, % <sup>z,y</sup>					Mean Response
		1	2	3	4	5	
Taking Horsemanship has improved the quality of my educational experience at SUU.	163	0.0	0.6	4.3	24.5	70.6	4.65 <sup>a</sup>
The Horsemanship program has influenced my decision to attend or remain in school at SUU.	157	10.2	14.6	28.0	21.0	26.1	3.38 <sup>b</sup>
The equine program could be influential in attracting students to SUU.	161	0.6	0.6	9.3	29.8	59.6	4.47 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>z</sup> Respondents used the following Likert-type scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.  
<sup>y</sup> Chi-square analysis for distribution of responses  $P < 0.001$ .  
<sup>a,b</sup> Means with different superscripts within column differ by one-way ANOVA at  $P = 0.001$ .

**Table 6. Summary of Responses to Survey Statements Focused on Interest in an Equine Science Degree or Minor among Students Participating in Equine Courses**

Statement	n	Response, % <sup>z,y</sup>					Mean Response
		1	2	3	4	5	
I would be interested in earning a Bachelors Degree in Equine Science.	158	20.3	19.0	29.1	8.9	22.8	2.95
I would be interested in earning a Minor in Equine Science.	157	14.0	14.6	26.8	19.7	24.8	3.27
I would be interested in earning an Associates Degree in Equine Science.	157	17.2	21.7	24.8	14.6	21.7	3.02

<sup>z</sup> Respondents used the following Likert-type scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.  
<sup>y</sup> Chi-square analysis for distribution of responses non-significant.

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referred to developing greater confidence, overcoming fears, and expanding knowledge and skills.

## Summary

The survey results provide substantial evidence that equine courses have a favorable impact on SUU students through both personal and educational value. These courses appear to strengthen the overall satisfaction in their educational experience. The data indicate that continuing and improving the equine courses at SUU will benefit the agriculture program and the university. The interest expressed in an equine science degree or minor has provided valuable support for the proposal of an equine degree. Since completion of this survey, an associate of applied science in equine studies has been approved by the Utah State Board of Regents and implemented at SUU. Further assessment will be useful to determine specific ways to develop and improve the program. Perspectives of alumni and industry professionals will also be a valuable component of future program assessment and development.

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