

Undergraduate Horse Industry Study Tour Enhances Experiential Learning

Kathy Anderson¹
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, NE 68358-0908



Abstract

A week long, spring semester Horse Industry Study Tour was established in 2003 to expose students to the broad array of opportunities in the equine industry and to increase students' appreciation for the various disciplines within the horse industry. The tour is limited to eight University of Nebraska students which travel either to the eastern Kentucky region (primarily horse racing) or south to the north Texas region (primarily stock horses) and encompasses breeding facilities, breed and discipline associations, race tracks, training facilities, veterinary clinics, and various other horse industry supportive businesses. Prior to the tour, students participated in once-a-week planning meetings for nearly nine weeks consisting of identifying tour stops, researching each stop, and discussion of each. Following the tour, students completed a 10 to 15 page paper as well as a follow up survey on the usefulness of the tour. Post-tour survey results compiled over the eight years of the tour clearly indicate that a significant gain in knowledge of the horse industry and the various disciplines was achieved. The Horse Industry Study Tour has been a beneficial means of experiential learning for students by enhancing their career exploration and expanding their understanding of the broad spectrum of the equine industries.

Introduction

Experiential learning has become an important component of many undergraduate teaching programs. College educators have found experiential learning a valuable addition to traditional instruction (Cantor, 1995). To be successful, this type of learning must address the needs and wants of the learner (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). Self-initiated, personal involvement evaluated by the learner and pervasive effects on the learner are all characteristics of an effective experiential learning process (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). Recent research (Retallick and Steiner, 2009) has demonstrated the development of a college-wide experiential learning program (Science With Practice, SWP) provided students the outlet to acquire technical skills, link coursework to practical applications, and develop research skills. Students in the SWP program took more responsibility for their work, realized the connection between their learning

and work experiences and faculty moved from employers to mentors.

Experiential learning is becoming even more important in agricultural related academic programs as the demographics of the students have been changing. Students in colleges of agriculture have shifted from primarily rural backgrounds to students coming from urban and suburban backgrounds. Academic agricultural programs have had students entering with little or no practical livestock experience for over 20 years (Mollett and Leslie, 1986). Furthermore, the benefit of experiential learning attained in an animal science course designed to teach hands-on skills which students later identified as important in their ultimate careers was reported by Marshal et. al. (1998) reported.

Agriculturally related study tours have been used for some time to expand students understanding of their related industries (Posler and Mugler, 1980; Ockerman, 1974), thus enhance the experiential learning process. Students on study tours gain significant insights regarding other agricultural systems which are impossible to grasp by other means (Robbins and Orr, 2004).

The University of Nebraska Horse Industry Study Tour is one venue in which student's encounter experiential learning as they are provided the opportunity to realize industry applications of their collegiate curriculum.

Materials and Methods

In order to provide students an opportunity to be exposed to a vast array of potential careers and various elements of the equine industry, a Horse Industry Study Tour course was developed and first offered spring semester of 2003. Goals of the Horse Industry Study Tour were to:

1. Expand student's knowledge of the horse industry.
2. Provide opportunities for exploring potential horse industry careers.
3. Increase student's knowledge of the various disciplines within the horse industry.

This junior level, two credit hour spring semester course is limited to a single van of eight students plus one instructor. In the years of 2003 to 2006, the tour was conducted the week following spring semester final exams. Beginning in 2007, the tour took place

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Animal Science, C204 Animal Science; Tel: 402-472-6414; Fax: 402-472-6362; Email: Kanderson1@unl.edu

during the week of Spring break. The Study Tour travels for five to six days and alternates either an eastern region (Kentucky area) or southern region (Oklahoma, north Texas area). Tour stops include a variety of equine industries ranging from breed associations, breeding farms, training facilities, veterinary clinics, race tracks, museums, discipline associations etc. A combination of various disciplines, breeds and industries are targeted in order to provide variation and expose students to unfamiliar areas.

Funding for the tour was provided by a \$75 lab fee paid during registration and a \$200 course fee, paid by the students over two installments at the beginning of the semester. These pre-collected fees cover the cost of transportation by university van and motel expenses. Additionally, students are personally responsible for all meals and admission fees.

Students are directly involved in developing the tour. Weekly class meetings are held prior to the tour in order to identify tour stops, research each location, learn about the horse industry, and organize the tour. At the beginning of the semester, each student identifies at least five horse industry related locations they would like to visit. The class is then assigned two to four places per week and each student writes a one page summary of each potential tour stop. Each tour location is reviewed and discussed in the pre-tour class meetings. Students share information researched on each operation and what they would like to gain/learn during the tour. Reports are kept by the instructor and returned and reviewed by the class the day prior to the stop. Additionally, students are assigned to be "leaders" for each location in which they are responsible for leading discussions and questions.

Following the tour, students are required to submit a 10 to 15 page paper relating to what was gained from the tour experience. Additionally, students are asked to complete a questionnaire to provide information on what they got out of the tour and how it might benefit them in the future.

Results and Discussion

Student demographics

Twenty-six of the 48 students (54.17%) which had participated in Horse Industry Study Tour between 2003 and 2008 completed a survey accessing the usefulness of the Study Tour. Of the students responding to the survey, 57.69% (15/26) traveled to the southern/Texas region, and 42.30% (11/26) went on the Kentucky area tour. The majority of student respondents in the course have been senior level

(53.84%, n=14), followed by junior level (19.23%, n=5) and graduate (19.23%, n=5), with a few sophomore level (7.69%, n=2) students.

Most students enrolled in Horse Industry Study Tour course have been involved in the University of Nebraska Animal Science academic program as 76.92% (n=20) had taken at least one Animal Science equine specific course.

Students were surveyed to determine their level of horse experience and were asked to estimate the number of years they had ridden, number of years they had shown or exhibited horses, years of raising foals/or breeding mares, years of recreational riding, and years of using horses for work such as in feed yards or ranch work (Figure 1).

Most students (81.72%) had some type of riding experience and 50.21% had some type of horse exhibition/showing experience. However, over half of the students (53.84%, 14/26) had never raised foals or bred mares. Additionally, 46.15% (12/26) had not used horses for some type of feed yard or ranch type work. In general, demographics of the Horse Industry Study Tour students appear to be somewhat similar to those reported by Esbenshade (2007) indicating students are more diverse with fewer from "traditional" rural backgrounds.

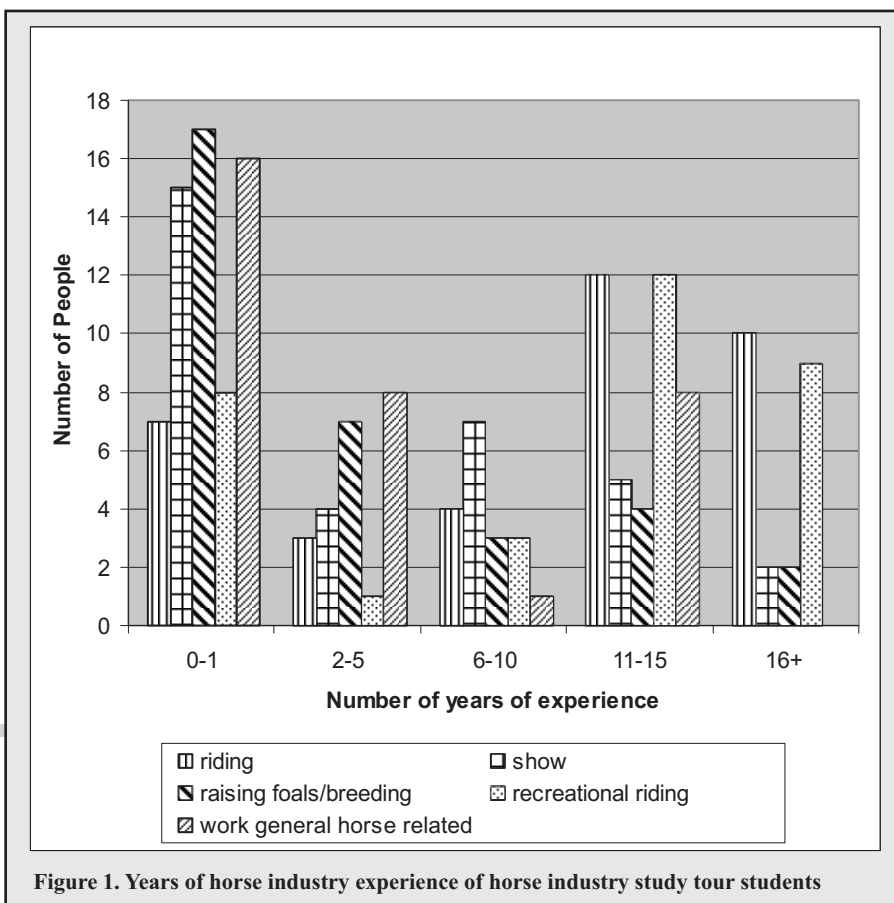


Figure 1. Years of horse industry experience of horse industry study tour students

Tour evaluation

Students were asked to respond on a Likert-type scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) to

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questions addressing tour planning, career influences, application to courses, industry knowledge, and internships.

Pre-tour planning

Students responded very favorably to the pre-tour planning meetings and general tour organization (Table 1). The majority of students 84.61% indicated the pre-tour meetings in which tour locations were identified and discussed were beneficial. Furthermore, 96.12% strongly agreed or agreed the assigned written reports of each tour stop were useful and relevant. These reports required students to research each location to ensure they had an understanding of the operation prior to visiting it. Furthermore, students indicated questions they would ask and items they would like the host to address prior to the tour. These reports were kept by the instructor and returned to the students and reviewed just prior to each stop. This pre-tour research provided students a much better understanding and appreciation for each facility. Many students had minimal experience in some of these areas, thus the pre-tour research provided them valuable background information prior to visiting each location. Previous reports on agriculturally related study tours have also indicated great benefits of “intense” pre-tour preparations (Ockerman, 1974)

In general, the students indicated the tour was well planned (88.00%), was conducted efficiently (84.6%) and met the expectations (93.22%) of the students (Table 1). Much pre-planning of the tour is done by the instructor through phone calls and

	% Rated 4 or 5 ^a	Mean ^a	Standard Deviation
Pre tour meetings were beneficial	84.61	4.33	0.97
Pre-tour reports provided valuable preview of tour stops	96.12	4.42	0.56
The tour met my expectations	93.22	4.75	0.62
Tour was well planned	88.00	4.34	0.92
Tour was conducted efficiently	84.61	4.27	1.03

^aLikert - type scale used (5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree, 3=Neither Agree or Disagree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree)

numerous emails to develop a well thought out, planned itinerary. The students have a role in selecting locations and the instructor develops the actual itinerary.

Benefits of the tour

The Horse Industry Study Tour has provided students a greatly expanded appreciation for all aspects of the horse industry (Table 2). All students (100%) either strongly agreed or agreed that the Study Tour expanded their understanding of the horse industry. Nearly all (96.22%) felt the tour provided them new revelations of the horse industry. Many of these student's primary horse experience had been in recreation or showing. A goal of the tour was to broaden their scope and expose them to the

	% Rated 4 to 5 ^a	Mean ^a	Standard Deviation
My understanding of horse industry was expanded	100	4.85	0.37
Increased my understanding various elements of horse industry	96.41	4.69	0.55
The tour provided me new revelations about the horse industry	96.22	4.60	0.57
Increased my knowledge of potential careers in the horse industry	100	4.77	0.43
The tour influenced my career path	54.34	3.58	1.10
I have a greater realization of internship opportunities	96.53	4.62	0.69
Provide practical applications to courses I've taken	77.46	4.07	0.74

^aLikert - type scale used (5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree, 3=Neither Agree or Disagree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree)

vast array of opportunities in the equine industry. Attaining this goal is further supported by 96.41% of the students indicating they had a much greater understanding of the various elements of the horse industry after taking part in the study tour.

The opportunity to spend time at breed and discipline organizations, museums, and supportive businesses such as feed companies, insurance and trailer manufacturers helped to provide the students different opportunities in the horse industry, outside of traditional careers. Thus, all students (100%) indicated the Study Tour provided them an increase in knowledge of potential equine related careers.

However, only 54.34% of the students indicated the tour influenced their career path. The majority of students on the tour are senior followed by junior undergraduate and graduate students. It is likely many of these have already narrowed their scope of a chosen career path. This is in agreement with work by Esters (2007) which reported undergraduate freshman and senior agricultural science students were moderately certain about their career choices. However, it was suggested greater personal and career exploration during their undergraduate career would lead to greater consideration of various opportunities and result in more satisfying and

confident career choices (Imbimbo et al., 2005; Fouad, 2007). Participation on the Study Tour does provide students the opportunity to be exposed to numerous different types of careers related in various ways to the horse industry.

University of Nebraska animal science students are strongly encouraged to participate in some type of internship during their undergraduate program. Therefore focuses of many of the study tour stops were potential internships. In relation to this focus, 96.53% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that the study tour provided them increased knowledge of potential internship opportunities (Table 2). Furthermore, 77.46% strongly agreed or agreed the tour provided practical applications to the courses they had taken.

Table 3. Student Responses Related to Changes in their Understanding of Various Horse Industry Disciplines (n=26)

	% Rated 4 or 5 ^a	Mean ^a	Standard Deviation
The Horse Industry Study Tour increased my understanding of the:			
Horse Breeding industry	66.76	4.62	0.56
Horse Training industry	91.14	4.29	0.62
Horse Feed industry	75.37	3.95	0.69
Horse Racing industry	79.21	4.79	0.41
Supportive Horse industries	87.54	4.38	0.71

^aLikert - type scale used (5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree, 3=Neither Agree or Disagree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree)

Understanding of Equine Industries

A goal of the tour is to provide students exposure to numerous equine industries and disciplines. The students enrolled in the Study Tour have much variation in their horse related background with most being involved recreationally and/or competitively. Few had much experience in raising and/or breeding horses. When asked about specific equine related industries (Table 3), 66.76% of the students strongly agreed they had increased understanding of the equine breeding industry after participating on the tour. This was provided by touring breeding farms and veterinary clinics and observing breeding, embryo transfer, and other reproductive related practices. Furthermore, 79.21% of the students had a much greater understanding of the racing industry after touring race tracks, interviewing race horse trainers, touring sales companies, etc. Numerous training facilities were visited which included a variety of disciplines. Ninety-one percent of the students had a greater understanding of the horse training business after the Study Tour. In addition, students were exposed to various supportive industries such as feed companies, horse trailer manufacturers and equine insurance. Seventy-five percent had a greater knowledge of the feed industry whereas 87.54% indicated they had increased their understanding of other supportive industries such as trailer manufacturers and equine insurance agencies.

Similar to changing student demographic trends at other institutions (Swanson and Nicoles, 2007), students participating in the Horse Industry Study Tour course have had minimal out-of-class experience of the broad array of equine industries. This tour is a valuable means for students to realize the opportunities available in the equine industry and link course material to industry practices. The Horse Industry Study Tour has been beneficial to students by enhancing their career exploration and expanding their understanding of the broad spectrum of the equine industries. As previously reported by Posler and Mugler (1980), students report participation on the study tour is an extremely worthwhile endeavor. It greatly broadens the perspective of those able to attend and provides a life long investment of appreciation for the entire equine industry.

Summary

Our results demonstrate students participating on a week-long study tour attained valuable insight to numerous diverse inter-workings of the horse industry. Being provided the opportunity to tour a variety of operations and interview professionals working in the equine world provided

students new perspectives and appreciation for never before thought of opportunities.

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