

The Feasibility of Implementing an Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy Curriculum into Higher Education¹

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Abstract

Increased research on the benefits of equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) for people with special needs and the success of these programs has generated an increase in education on EAAT in the United States. This study provides evidence of the viability of EAAT programs in higher education and helps determine whether universities and colleges should consider implementing these programs into their curriculum, with particular focus on Murray State University. Three surveys sent to Community EAAT programs, Higher Education EAAT programs and Special Education Administration of western KY counties showed a large difference in operational costs between Community EAAT programs and Higher Education EAAT programs. Higher Education EAAT programs reported an employment rate of 58% of graduates going into the EAAT field. Community EAAT programs reported valuing education more than experience when hiring employees and Special Education Administration had a strong belief in the positive effects of EAAT but reported that very few of their students with special needs were participating. Creating an EAAT program at Murray State University could provide the education preferred by employers for those interested in teaching EAAT and possibly increase the number of students with special needs in the western KY area that participate in EAAT.

Introduction

Very few higher education institutions have an EAAT program to complement their equine program, despite the many documented benefits of EAAT (Scott, 2005). Even with numerous occupational therapy, clinical psychology, occupational safety and health and special education programs, there is very little mention of EAAT as an alternative. With increasing inquiries from prospective students visiting Murray State University as

well as the interest by current university students (Porr, C.A., personal communication), it may be a beneficial subject to teach in higher education institutions, specifically Murray State University.

In order for an EAAT program to succeed at the university/collegiate level, there must be a demand among students to learn this type of curriculum. Research has been conducted on the effects of Principles of Therapeutic Riding curriculum on students at Texas Tech University. Results indicated that after students had been through the curriculum, they had a greater understanding of disabilities and what families who have children with special needs face daily (Cepica, 2005). These students also had an interest in continuing in this program or another community service based learning program. This research indicates there is student interest in the subject.

Equestrian programs at the university/collegiate level are costly to operate. A study conducted at William Woods University explored the potential of adding an EAAT curriculum to a current equine program in order to generate additional income to support the existing program. From this research, a proposal was created and EAAT curriculum implemented that required community service from the students and also increased program revenue (Mullen, 2010). Due to the goals and needs of EAAT curriculum, many colleges and universities are redesigning their general curriculum to target specific skills needed for the job market (Phillips et al., 2008). Other useful research that has been conducted includes the study of the role colleges and universities play in the education of EAAT professionals. The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) is considered the premier organization that promotes EAAT for individuals with special needs in the United States. Petitto (2010) found that some PATH Intl.

¹This study was deemed exempt by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board

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centers were partnered with a university or college in a variety of ways including internships, partnerships, shared facilities, or as research collaborators.

These studies support the positive potential of implementing an EAAT program at the university/collegiate level, but more research needs to be conducted to evaluate the cost, public demand and success of existing EAAT programs in higher education. Therefore, the objectives of this study were 1) to assess the expenses associated with operating an EAAT program in the community as well as the cost of teaching EAAT program curriculum at the university/collegiate level; 2) to evaluate what EAAT programs in the community value when hiring employees; 3) to assess information on how EAAT programs in the community and at the university/collegiate level are established and operated; and 4) to evaluate the demand for an EAAT program at the university/collegiate level in Western Kentucky by special education administration.

Methods

This study was conducted using three separate surveys which were administered electronically using a Qualtrics survey instrument. The first survey, Community EAAT Programs, was sent to 10 private EAAT programs in the southwestern Kentucky community to assess their operating costs, attendance levels of clients and volunteers and how they rank experience versus education when hiring. The second survey, Higher Education EAAT Programs, was sent to 10 university/collegiate EAAT program instructors to determine their operating cost, number of students enrolled, employment rates of graduates, the steps taken to implement their program and the success of their programs to date. The third and final survey, Special Education Administration, was sent to special education administration of 10 southwestern Kentucky counties. This survey evaluated the board member's perception of EAAT, the number of students enrolled in EAAT programs and how much money, in dollars, they thought their students would be willing to pay for a 1-hour EAAT lesson. These surveys were first administered via e-mail in October of 2013 after speaking to each recipient on the phone. Two months later, in December, a follow up e-mail was sent to address any questions and encourage those who had not responded to complete the survey. Survey questions included descriptive text, Likert-type scale, multiple choice and graphic slider formats. Given the small population assessed, the small number of scaled instrument items and the exploratory, descriptive nature of this work, researchers relied on holistic, qualitative assessment by a panel of experts to determine reliability (Cronbach and Shavelson, 2004), content validity and face validity (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Considering the difficulty in contacting recipients, the response rate of the surveys was relatively good. Results from the Community EAAT Programs (n=10

total responses, 100%) showed costs ranging from less than \$10,000 to over \$800,000/year (n=7) to operate the program, with the number of clients ranging from 25-150 per week. This is drastically different from Higher Education EAAT Programs (n=8 total responses, 80%) which reported operational expenses ranging from less than \$50,000 to over \$300,000/year (n=5). The large difference in operating costs could be due to the fact that not all Higher Education EAAT Programs had their own facilities and horses. Many of them taught lecture classes and then partnered with a Community EAAT Program for the hands-on learning portion of the course. This eliminates extra expenses for building maintenance, insurance and horse care. Future research should identify the expenses reported by respondents in the survey.

Respondents from the Community EAAT Programs were asked to rank how they value experience compared to education when hiring on a scale of 0-10 (0=experience, 10=education). Figure 1 reveals that the general consensus leaned more toward favoring education over experience. Comments within this survey expressed the need for the EAAT industry to hire more graduates of this type of program, suggesting a need for more educated personnel. Not only does an EAAT program at the university/collegiate level have the potential to provide more educated employees, but it could also provide more volunteers that are essential to supporting the industry. Figure 2 portrays the volunteer versus client information from the 10 Community EAAT Programs surveyed. It is important to note that 30% of respondents reported a need for more trained volunteers and only 20% reported having more volunteers than they needed in order to operate.

Higher Education EAAT Programs (n=8 total responses, 80%) reported the average employment rate of students graduating from these programs into the EAAT field was 58%. Six out of the eight schools surveyed reported grants and donations as a source of income to fund their EAAT program and two out of the eight charged their students course fees. Table 1 por-

Figure 1. Community EAAT Programs Valuation of Experience vs. Education When Hiring

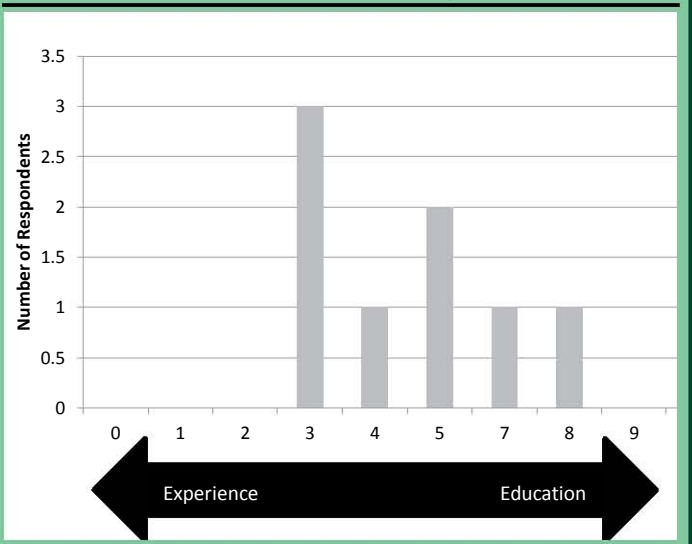


Figure 2. Community EAAT Program Client vs. Volunteer Information

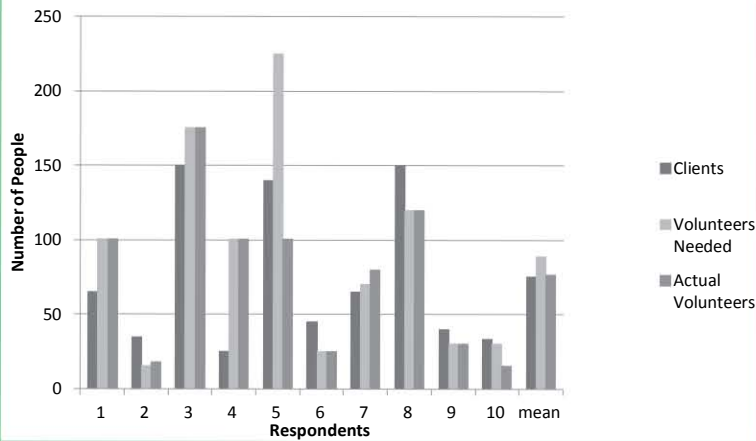


Table 1. Number of Students Enrolled in Education EAAT Programs (n = 8)

Respondent	Undergraduate Students	Graduate Students
1	50	10
2	20	N/A
3	10	N/A
4	75	5
5	15	1
6	15	8
8	N/A	15

Notes: N/A= The program is not available to that category of student.

trays enrollment numbers of the Higher Education EAAT Programs. It is important to note that some programs offered their curriculum to either undergraduate students or graduate students, not both. This could be due to the fact that some graduate programs offered PATH Intl. certification in addition to the graduate degree, whereas undergraduate programs do not. PATH Intl. certification requires 25 hours of teaching two or more individuals with disabilities, which may have been more easily incorporated into a graduate curriculum (PATH Intl., 2014).

Special Education Administration (n=8 total responses, 80%) respondents showed great belief in the positive effects of EAAT on a ranked scale (average 7/10), but they reported that only 2.5% of special education students in the eight Kentucky counties were currently participating in EAAT. When asked why they thought students did not participate in EAAT, the top two reasons were lack of money and lack of transportation. The average cost that administration thought students would be willing to pay for a 1-hour equine assisted therapy lesson was \$12.14 with values ranging from \$0-\$30. This is in conflict with current fees charged by Community EAAT Programs, which generally range from \$45-\$125 per hour. This makes it particularly difficult on families because insurance normally only covers equine assisted therapy with a licensed/credentialed professional and will not cover equine assisted activities without an occupational therapist, physical therapist, social worker, etc. (Johnston, 2013). The difficulty is only compounded when the transportation barrier is considered.

Summary

Overall, results indicated a positive understanding of the benefits of EAAT, a need for students in Kentucky school systems with special needs and a great assertion of the need for graduates in this field. Colleges and universities could use the information assembled from this study to decide whether or not they should add an EAAT program to their curriculum. This type of curriculum would likely require alliance with PATH Intl. and involve a selection of courses from the area of equine management, physical therapy and psychology. This alliance could come from the Higher Education Membership PATH Intl. offers for colleges and universities wanting to educate students in EAAT. This could also open more collaborative opportunities between departments within a given institution. More research should be conducted on the sources of funding for creating and sustaining an EAAT educational curriculum, as well as research on the barriers of people with special needs not being able to participate in EAAT.

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