

# Use of an Online Survey to Measure an Equine Program's Alumni Satisfaction

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## Abstract

Enrollment in the Colorado State University (CSU) Equine Sciences program has steadily increased since 1986. Currently (fall 2006), the College of Agricultural Sciences reports 417 Equine Science majors with approximately 100 students graduating each year. Since the program's inception in 1986, little information has been collected regarding alumni satisfaction. Additionally, the Equine Sciences Program's curriculum virtually remained unchanged until fall 2006. A CSU Equine Sciences Advisory committee consisting of prominent and successful individuals from the equine industry was formed in September of 2004. The committee reviewed the current curriculum and made recommendations for change. One of the resulting recommendations was to better monitor the status and satisfaction of alumni. More specifically, the committee recommended gathering information on the job placement of graduates, the effectiveness of specific classes within their educational program, income level after graduation, and their overall satisfaction with their earned Equine Sciences degree. To address the committee's recommendations, an online survey was conducted during the summer of 2005. The Equine Sciences administration, faculty and staff found the online survey to be an effective tool for measuring the satisfaction of alumni within an undergraduate degree program.

## Introduction

The U.S. horse industry has a direct economic effect of \$39 billion annually and employs more than 700,000 people (American Horse Council, 2005). Serving as a major support for this growing industry is the Colorado State University (CSU) Equine Sciences program which is currently the largest equine program at any land grant university in the United States and the largest student programs in the University's College of Agricultural Sciences. The mission of education is to prepare students for the future (Gonyea, 1998). As an industry changes, so does the nature and number of prospective occupations. To best prepare our graduates for a successful future, educational programs must be current in industry technology, trends and needs. Per the recommendations of the Advisory Committee, the CSU Equine Sciences Program conducted a survey of its alumni to determine their level of satisfaction with their education. For simplicity and cost effectiveness, an online survey was developed and utilized.

While traditional "paper and pencil" research methods will always play an important role in many fields of research, they suffer from serious weaknesses, drawbacks, and risks to data integrity (PsychData, n.d.). The need for improvements to these traditional methods becomes very clear when one considers the significant role that data from social science research plays in the development of public policy, theory, and practice. If data are not accurate, secure, and reliable, then a survey's ability to make an important contribution can be severely compromised. In addition, paper and pencil research methods are surprisingly expensive when labor costs associated with developing, mailing, unpacking and entering data from paper surveys are totaled.

The development of the Internet has had a profound effect on the survey research industry and could soon replace traditional methods of survey data collection. One of the greatest strengths of an online survey is the ability to collect large amounts of data in an extremely short amount of time and also eliminate the need for a researcher to manually enter the information into a database. Online surveys are relatively fast, easily accessible and inexpensive (Smith and Leigh, 1997). After creating a survey questionnaire, placing it online and recruiting the subjects, most of the work is done. Within a matter of days, many participants can complete the survey with the results automatically saved to a database for later evaluation. Web-based data collection can also be more flexible than traditional methods. Online survey programs can randomize the order of questions and create skip question patterns. Researchers can also tailor each question of an online survey to fit an individual participant. For example, if one is interested in only a certain population of survey respondents answering a particular question, the online survey can be programmed such that all other participants never see that particular question (i.e. the question is "skipped"). Additionally, if a researcher is interested in international populations, web-based surveys allow you to quickly draw responses from all over the world. Finally, if a survey contains sensitive questions, the online survey makes it easier and more comfortable for an individual to respond honestly while maintaining complete anonymity (McDowell, 2001).

While there are many advantages to utilizing an online survey, a researcher must consider whether the targeted participants will have opportunity to respond. According to a National Geographic Society study (1999), respondents to online surveys are

younger, more highly educated, and more likely to be white than the general U.S. population. However, since 1999, the demographics of the Internet are ever changing and among certain subpopulations, Internet usage may already be nearly universal (Internet World Statistics, 2006). In 1995, only 30% of college bound high school seniors were reported to be active on the internet (Art and Science Group, Inc.). Only five years later, 94% of college-bound seniors were reported to have access to the Internet (National Geographic Society, 1999). Thus, an online survey can provide researchers with high quality information from a sample of participants who are likely to frequent the Internet, such as college students or recent graduates. However, for researchers interested in non-white or older populations, the online survey may not be the source for them.

Although not as prevalent today as in the past, technical glitches are also a concern when employing web-based survey systems (ITS Online Surveys, 2001). If a “crash” in a system occurs, respondent may not be able to complete the survey resulting in missing data. Contrary to traditional survey methods, with online surveys there may be the potential for double entry or duplicate responses. A simple solution to this potential problem is to assign an ID to each participant that allows only one response per ID.

## Methods

Contact information of alumni from the Colorado State University (CSU) Equine Sciences Program was obtained from the CSU Alumni Association (n = 910). Because only a limited number of email addresses were available, each alumnus was sent a letter from the Equine Sciences Program administration that invited them to participate in an online survey. The letter informed potential participants that there were no known benefits or risks associated with participation in the survey. Additionally, participants were informed of the privacy of their responses and provided with a link to the online survey. To prevent third party (non-invited) participation, the survey link was unique and not accessible from any other website address. The survey was available for 45 days.

Readily available survey software was used to create the survey instrument. The survey itself consisted of 19 questions. Questions were designed by the Equine Sciences administration, faculty, staff and graduate students to obtain information from alumni related to their current and past employment, satisfaction with the program curriculum and their overall satisfaction with the program and their education. The skip question function was employed for convenience of participants. For example, an individual may first have been asked if they participated in a certain course. If the participant answered “yes,” they may then have been asked about their level of satisfaction with that course. If the participant answered “no” they had not taken a particular

course, they did not receive the follow up question asking about their satisfaction. All communication with alumni including the invitation to participate and the survey itself were approved by the CSU Human Research Committee in July 2005.

## Results and Discussion

Overall, a 19% response rate was achieved (n = 152; Table 1). Responses were obtained from alumni representing each graduating class since the programs inception in 1986 (Table 1). Because respondents to online surveys tend to be younger (National Geographic Society, 1999) we were pleased to receive responses from alumni from early graduating classes. The greatest number of responses was obtained from alumni in the 2003 graduating class (Table 1).

The results of the survey provided the administration, faculty and staff with valuable information. From the survey data, we learned that the majority of respondents (56%) have been directly employed in the equine industry post graduation (Table 2). Of those respondents who have been employed in the equine industry at some point after their graduation, 17% reported being employed as horse trainers (the most popular response). It is interesting to note that

**Table 1. Number of Colorado State University Equine Sciences Program Alumni Who Responded to an Online Survey Reported by Graduation Year (n=152)**

<u>Graduation Year</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
1987	5
1988	1
1989	12
1990	6
1991	7
1992	4
1993	3
1994	7
1995	7
1996	7
1997	7
1998	8
1999	4
2000	10
2001	11
2002	11
2003	20
2004	18
2005	1

all of the respondents who claimed horse training as the current job also claimed to be employed in their preferred area of employment. Of the remaining respondents employed in the equine industry, 6% reported being employed as veterinary technicians, 5% employed in alternative therapy fields, and 5% employed as lecturers. The remaining responses were divided among many different areas. Of those

**Table 2. Number of years Colorado State University Equine Sciences Program Alumni Who Responded to an Online Survey Have Spent Employed in the Equine Industry Since the Year They Graduated (n=152)**

<u>Number of Years</u>	<u>Percentage of Alumni</u>
0	32%
Less than 1	13%
1-5	36%
6-10	9%
More than 10	10%

respondents not employed in the equine industry after graduation, 14% claimed to have been employed in the nursing/ hospital industry, 11% in education or teaching, and 5% in real estate or property management. The remaining responses were divided among many different areas. It is also interesting to note that although a large percentage of the graduates from the CSU Equine Sciences Program were not employed in the equine industry after graduation, most claimed to be satisfied with their earned degree and would recommend the program to others. This result is important and lends to the satisfaction of our alumni with their education regardless of direct employment post graduation. These results have proven valuable and we have begun to adjust our program curriculum to meet the industry's employment needs. When analyzing the data from alumni regarding their satisfaction with individual classes offered as part of the program, we found alumni were more than satisfied with the majority of the classes within the current curriculum. However, as a result of the online survey responses, changes to our curriculum have been implemented in an effort to better prepare our graduates. For example, Equine Behavior was a class alumni reported as being valuable to their program. However, Equine Behavior was dropped from the curriculum in the early 1990's but since the survey has been added back to the curriculum. Many other changes have been implemented based on input from our alumni. According to the survey results, 84% of alumni reported being either very satisfied (38%) or satisfied (46%) with the education and degree they had earned from the CSU Equine Sciences Program.

## Summary

Program assessment and resultant change is important to the future of any institution. To best prepare graduates, educational institutions must update curriculum to meet the demands of changing technology, industry trends and demands. The administration, faculty and staff within the Colorado State University Equine Sciences Program have found the use of an online survey to be an excellent tool to quickly and inexpensively measure the effectiveness of a program and the satisfaction of its graduates. Future efforts will continue to monitor the program and satisfaction of its graduates.

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