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Student Perceptions and Knowledge of the Feedlot Industry and the Feedyard Management Specialization Internship

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Summary

A survey was developed for seniors in the undergraduate feedlot management class (ASCI 457) at UNL to gauge interest in feedlot management as a profession and familiarity with the Feedyard Management Internship Program. The survey found that students feel the internship is beneficial for a future in production agriculture. The internship increases confidence of employment and management skills once participation is complete along with gaining experience. The number of positions available and the average salary of feedlot managers are underestimated by students. Recruiting efforts appear to be informing students of the program.

Introduction

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Feedyard Management Specialization Internship has been offered the past 26 years to students following completion of their B.S. degree. Students interested in feedyard management or related fields are the target for completing the internship program. The internship starts with six weeks of coursework focusing on feedlot nutrition, health, personnel management, economics, and nutrient management. During those six weeks, guest speakers are invited to talk with students about the beef industry and these topics. Following the first six weeks of class, interns are placed in his or her individual feedlot for four and a half months to get hands-on experience of all sectors of the feedlot. Finally, they return for two weeks for a wrap-up session to share their experiences. The internship is set up to connect young people in the industry with potential jobs along with gaining a unique experience while obtaining an education of the industry.

A survey was given to the senior feedlot management class (ASCI 457) at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln with the

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purpose of determining student perceptions of a career in the field of feedyard management and to gauge the success of recruitment efforts on awareness and participation in the feedyard management internship.

Procedure

Surveys were administered to senior (undergraduate) feedlot management class (ASCI 457) at UNL in the fall the past 4 years (from 2011 through 2014). For each year, there were 22, 17, 33, and 43 participants, respectively. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. The survey had 26 multiple choice and short answer questions to gain knowledge of interest in the internship, interest in feedyard management, and effectiveness of recruiting. Results were summarized by year and all four years were assembled together per question.

Results

Many of the students taking the Feedlot Management class at UNL have a background with beef cattle varying from a 4H project to a family owned business. The majority of the students (51–63%) have plans to go into production agriculture or a related industry once their education is complete. Although feedlot management was one of the career choices, many students had other interests even though they were enrolled in the senior management class focused on feedlots.

When choosing a career, the students responded that feedlot management would be appealing if a defined work schedule were set (question 6), personal interests were met, they had experience with the job and the job offered adequate compensation (question 4). Over half of the students said they feel \$30,000–\$40,000 would be an acceptable wage when entering a mid-level management position at the feedlot. They also underestimated the average salary of

a feedlot manager, where the average is over \$71,000 according to the 2010 survey conducted by the Department of Agriculture Economics (<http://agecon.unl.edu/resources>). Students were not well aware of the availability of feedlot management positions, and underestimated the potential for careers within feedlot management. The internship is one way to connect students to these potential jobs while gaining experience. Once the student completes the internship, he or she often has the option to stay on with that feedlot for full-time employment.

When asked about managing financial risk at the feedlot, many of the students felt neither prepared nor unprepared (score of 3) or felt poorly prepared to complete that task. Interestingly, students perceived that they were prepared to manage the cattle at the production site. When female students were asked about their comfort working in a male dominant field, almost all felt comfortable. In the feedlot internship, students are taught about both personnel and financial risk to prepare them for what they will encounter in the feedlot. Instructors attempt to help students understand common practices in a feedlot today.

From 2011 to 2014, an increasing number of students said they were planning on participating in the internship. Those not interested said personal interests and applicability to their future career were the main reasons for not participating or planning to participate. The internship is set up to accommodate students. Location must be agreed upon, and the feedyard is selected based on the student's interests.

Upon graduation from UNL, most students felt they would not be prepared to take over a feedlot management position; however, the opposite response was made when asked if they felt they would be prepared after completing the internship. Students were confident in full-time employment after graduation, but feel they would be more confident if they completed the internship before full-time employment.

The survey found that 50 to 70% of the students made their post graduation plans before their senior year (as a junior in college or earlier). This says that recruiting efforts need to be geared towards underclassmen to inform them of the internship before plans are made. From 2011 to 2014, increasing numbers of students were knowledgeable of the feedlot internship, showing that more recent recruiting efforts over the past 4 years has been successful at informing students of the internship.

The internship increases confidence of

employment and management skills once completed. Students also value gaining experience and feel experience is important before taking a full-time job. The number of positions available and the average salary of feedlot managers are underestimated by students, yet students feel pay is one of their top priorities for job selection. Recruiting efforts appear to be effective for informing students of the program; however, raising awareness needs to be focused on underclassmen.

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Table 1. Feedyard Management Specialization internship survey results

	2014	2013	2012	2011
1. Plans following graduation Production Agriculture				
Cow-Calf	63%	57%	55%	68%
Feedlot	37%	39%	45%	26%
Non-Beef Cattle	0%	4%	0%	6%
Continue Education	16%	5%	9%	29%
Industry Related	21%	36%	24%	15%
Other	0%	0%	6%	5%
2. Time of making post-graduation plans				
Junior Year	27%	28%	41%	30%
Prior to entering college	18%	6%	18%	18%
Freshmen or Sophomore Year	36%	25%	6%	39%
Senior Year	18%	41%	35%	14%
3. Strength of considering feedlot management (1 = least amount)				
1	5%	0%	0%	5%
2	18%	9%	24%	23%
3	25%	45%	18%	23%
4	25%	30%	29%	11%
5	27%	15%	29%	18%
4. Factors in choosing a career (average ranking)				
Personal Interests	2	1	1	1
Pay	6	2 & 3	2	2 & 3
Experience with potential job	1	2 & 3	3	5
Benefits (health insurance, medical, vacation, etc.)	4	4	4	4
Located in Nebraska	12	5	5	2 & 3
Upward mobility in the company	7	6	6	8
Schedule (hours, weekends off, vacation, etc)	5	7	7	7
Company culture (coworkers, language, etc.)	9	8	8	6
Company perks (company vehicle, etc.)	10	9	9	9
Housing availability	3	10	10	11
Work environment (weather exposure, dust conditions, etc.)	11	11	11	10
Proximity to a major city	8	12	12	12

Table 1. Feedyard Management Specialization internship survey results (continued)

	2014	2013	2012	2011
5. Acceptable starting wage for mid-level feedlot management position (actual average salary for mid-level management position is \$40,000-\$58,000).				
< \$20,000	0%	0%	0%	0%
\$20,000-\$20,000	18%	9%	6%	19%
\$30,000-\$40,000	52%	58%	59%	62%
\$40,000-\$50,000	27%	33%	29%	19%
> \$60,000	2%	0%	6%	0%
6. Would a clearly defined work schedule increase attractiveness of a Feedlot Manager?				
Yes	77%	58%	71%	61%
No	23%	42%	29%	39%
7. Students' perception of availability of feedlot manager positions (1 = extremely unavailable)				
1	7%	0%	0%	5%
2	25%	35%	32%	38%
3	52%	35%	58%	48%
4	11%	24%	5%	10%
5	5%	6%	5%	0%
8. Feel comfortable and adequately trained to manage the financial risk of a feedlot using futures and options (1 = not at all).				
1	22%	9%	12%	5%
2	25%	38%	35%	23%
3	25%	25%	35%	59%
4	17%	22%	6%	5%
5	11%	6%	12%	9%
9. Feel comfortable managing other people's cattle, capital and risk at custom feeding operation (1 = not at all)				
1	11%	3%	6%	9%
2	6%	16%	24%	23%
3	33%	47%	29%	50%
4	36%	28%	12%	14%
5	14%	6%	29%	5%
10. Estimate of average Nebraska Feedlot Manager salary per year (actual average feedlot manager salary is \$71,217)				
< \$40,000	2%	3%	6%	10%
\$40,000-\$50,000	26%	24%	17%	33%
\$50,000-\$60,000	35%	27%	44%	48%
\$60,000-\$70,000	30%	33%	33%	10%
> \$70,000	7%	12%	0%	0%
11. Beef Cattle Background				
Grew up with family involvement in feedlot industry	10%	12%	15%	15%
Grew up with family involvement in cow/calf industry	25%	29%	29%	32%
4-H background	22%	27%	21%	29%
FFA background	16%	16%	17%	17%
No family involvement growing up, but 4-H/FFA background	0%	0%	0%	0%
Experience working in feedlot or cow/calf (not family related)	15%	13%	15%	7%
Very limited	2%	3%	4%	0%

Table 1. Feedyard Management Specialization internship survey results (continued)

	2014	2013	2012	2011
12. Knowledge of UNL Feedyard Management Internship (1 = no knowledge).				
1	9%	13%	12%	50%
2	35%	32%	53%	32%
3	30%	26%	12%	18%
4	16%	29%	18%	0%
5	9%	0%	6%	0%
13. Students planning to enter Feedyard Management Internship				
Yes	26%	10%	35%	10%
No	74%	90%	65%	90%
14. Benefit of UNL Feedyard Management Internship to future career (1 = not at all).				
1	12%	10%	0%	29%
2	9%	24%	6%	29%
3	21%	29%	24%	24%
4	23%	10%	29%	10%
5	35%	29%	41%	10%
15. Why student does not plan on completing Feedyard Management internship				
Not applicable to future career	26%	30%	50%	40%
Too time consuming	3%	13%	17%	0%
No desire to take an additional class	26%	9%	17%	8%
Intern wages are prohibitively low	9%	0%	0%	3%
Personal (time away from family, significant other, etc.)	15%	22%	8%	15%
Other	21%	26%	8%	35%
16. Students' belief they are adequately trained upon UNL graduation to begin a Feedlot Manager career without internship				
Yes	37%	74%	71%	68%
No	63%	26%	29%	32%
17. Students' belief they would be adequately trained upon Feedlot Management internship completion to begin a Feedlot Manager career				
Yes	90%	86%	86%	81%
No	10%	14%	14%	19%
18. Student's perception of full-time employment upon graduation (1 = No chance, 5 = Definite employment)				
1	0%	0%	0%	0%
2	5%	0%	0%	0%
3	23%	25%	18%	11%
4	23%	31%	29%	26%
5	50%	44%	53%	63%
19. Student's perception of full-time employment upon UNL Feedlot Management internship completion (1 = No chance, 5 = Definite employment)				
1	0%	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	3%	0%	0%
3	8%	9%	6%	13%
4	36%	24%	38%	31%
5	56%	64%	56%	56%