

**Undergraduate Education As Preparation For Employment: A Survey of 2005 Graduates**

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### **Introduction**

It is the aim of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) at the University of Arizona to provide an educational experience which will best prepare graduates for employment in their determined field. Colleges of agriculture have historically had a significant role in preparing their graduates for entry and advancement in agricultural professions and careers. In order to continue to improve the focus and direction of the courses offered in CALs, continuous reviewing by graduates becomes necessary. As a result of the CALs undergraduate experience, it is desired that graduates have a sense of readiness as they enter the job market. In an effort to continually meet the needs of their respective clientele, departments must make decisions regarding the curriculum of their respective programs, such as the format in which to deliver courses (Roberts and Dyers, 2005). Graduates are in a unique position to judge the strengths and weaknesses of programs in which they have participated. Student contentment with their undergraduate experience is essential to an institution's vitality. It is widely believed that higher education could and should be more responsive to the needs of the industries that employ graduates. An outcomes assessment of undergraduate programs was desired to determine (but not limited to) student perceptions of the CALs undergraduate experience. The idea was to put a system in place which could be operated by staff in CALs on a continuing basis. It was hoped that information could be then used for analysis of trends over time.

### **Methods and Procedures**

The study used descriptive survey research design. It was designed to assess the undergraduate experience of CALs alumni from the University of Arizona as related to career preparation. The target population for this study was all domestic CALs graduates for the calendar year of 2005 (N=466). All foreign students were excluded. The population was comprised of 10 academic departments, with 19 respective majors. The survey frame was obtained from the office of Enrollment Management at the University of Arizona.

The study aimed to use the same methods as used in the original study. The 2005 study used a bimodal method of data collection. A total of four letters were developed to be mailed to the population. Each letter encouraged the population to respond electronically. The population sample was directed to [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com), an online questionnaire host. The cover letter indicated that participants would need to access the questionnaire host, and enter the password "cals05" and the provided 5-digit code number. The 5-digit code number was an indicator of the participant's unique response, department, and major. If graduates had not responded electronically, an additional hard copy was sent to encourage students to respond by direct mail.

### **Results/Findings**

Results were obtained from 178 of the 466 graduates in the year 2005 for a 38% response rate. Responses from early and late respondents were compared and the findings showed no significant difference which allows the study to be reasonably reflective of the 2005 CALs graduating class. Graduates were surveyed on the level of their satisfaction with the CALs

program overall, their preparation for the workforce or Graduate/Professional school, and their current employment status. In each category, results were based on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, 1= “Strongly Disagree” and 5= “Strongly Agree”. 92% of respondents ( $N=163$ ) agreed or strongly agreed that the University of Arizona helped them grow in knowledge and understanding of their academic field ( $M=4.26$ ,  $SD=.74$ ). 76.3% of respondents ( $N=55$ ) agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: “I am pleased with the quality of my UA College of Agriculture and Life Sciences undergraduate preparation for my graduate or professional education” ( $M=3.93$ ,  $SD=1.069$ ). There was also a high level of agreement regarding efficient preparation for employment in respondents ( $N=125$ ,  $M=3.67$ ,  $SD=1.098$ ). Of those graduates who responded, more than 75% were employed and over 50% of those employed were in a field closely related to their undergraduate program of study.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

Overall, CALS graduates had a favorable perception of their undergraduate education at the University of Arizona. Students felt they had sufficient growth both personally and professionally during their time at The University of Arizona. There was a majority of positive perceptions regarding preparation for employment or graduate/professional school. In addition, nearly all respondents were employed, in a graduate program, or both. The CALS graduates of 2005, when compared to the previous 2004 graduates did not differ widely in their responses and satisfaction with their undergraduate education and experience.

There was a large piece of missing information, due to non-response or validity of responses, which made it difficult to assess the entire CALS 2005 graduate class. Some recommendations to make this follow-up survey more successful would be to design a database of permanent email addresses for each graduate or at least the creation of a database with related information which will make it easier for researchers to contact former students personally. Another recommendation would be to conduct this survey at the exit interviews of students. Not only will this make students more accessible to reach, it will also provide researchers with opinions and feelings that students currently feel instead of waiting until they have been out of school for months. Follow-up studies such as this help to provide the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Arizona with the tools to improve their programs to better fit the changing needs of its students. Assessment of student perceptions helps to improve teaching strategies, department resources, and course information focus.

### **References**

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