Career Adaptability and Career Intentions among Interns in an Extension Summer Internship Program

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Abstract

Research has shown numerous benefits for college students participating in internships including gaining practical work experiences, developing skills, and determining career choice. Likewise, Extension internships are valuable career development experiences for college students, specifically for building professional networks and develop their career-essential skills. This research documents career intention and perceived career adaptability of Extension summer interns (N=15) in North Carolina. Interns' career intentions and adaptability were assessed both before and after the 10-week internship program for comparison. Approximately one-half of the interns were planning Extension careers prior to their internship, and the internship experience helped them identify specific Extension professional roles. Analysis showed interns increased their career adaptability during the internship program. Key recommendations include encouraging interns to achieve career goals by engaging previous interns as experienced peers and highlighting career adaptability among the interns' County Extension Directors.

Keywords: career adaptability, career intention, internships, Extension education, social cognitive career theory

Introduction

College students participating in internships perceive numerous benefits such as gaining experiential learning experience, developing skills, amplifying networking abilities, and expanding their knowledge within the field (Maertz et al., 2014; Shida & Radmehr, 2020). Furthermore, internship experiences help participants determine their career choice by clarifying likes and dislikes (DeCenzo et al., 2013). Extension internships are valuable career development experiences and may influence the development of talent for professional positions in agriculture and natural resources, community development, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H youth development. Grotta and McGrath (2013) surveyed Oregon State University Extension interns and found internships provide participants with real world experience, build their professional network, and develop their career-essential skills. Further, Muscio (2011) reported Extension internships helped interns develop technical knowledge and skills in addition to greater clarity of their career goals. As college students are seeking increased "learning, skills, and employment opportunities" afforded by internships (Johnson, et al., 2019, p.5), Extension internships provide experiential learning for future Extension professionals. In addition, internships benefit Extension personnel who receive new ideas and skills from interacting with interns (Donaldson, 2019; Donaldson; 2020; Wilken et. al., 2008). Overall, Extension internships contribute to a well-developed workforce for Extension organizations (Seevers & Dormody, 2010).

Extension Internship Program

Annually, North Carolina State University (NC State) conducts an internship program in approximately 30 counties to potentially recruit and develop the next generation of Extension professionals. Internship applicants are required to be enrolled in, accepted for, or a recent graduate of an accredited, four-year institution of higher education. North Carolina Cooperative

Extension County Centers hosting interns for the coming summer review applicants' resumes, conduct interviews, and select their applicant of choice. To prepare for the 10-week internship, interns complete a two-hour orientation and County Extension Directors and other Extension professionals serving as supervisors receive a separate orientation seminar. In addition to the orientation seminars, institutional support includes an orientation fact sheet highlighting policies, expectations, and procedures for both interns and supervisors. During the 10 weeks, interns gain understanding of Extension careers, broaden their job experiences, and provide nonformal education for local needs (Donaldson, 2021). Similar Extension internship programs are provided in Iowa (Sellers, et al. 2021), Missouri (Mott, et al., 2021), and Virginia (Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2022), among other states.

Theoretical Framework

The two interrelated theoretical frameworks underpinning this study are career adaptability and social cognitive career choice. Career adaptability is being prepared to deal with predictable and unpredictable changes within the workplace (Savickas, 1997). Career adaptability is a critical skill as the 21st century workplace reflects unexpected circumstances and career transitions (Park et al., 2019). Career adaptability includes career optimism, one's expectation of positive outcomes within one's career. The pioneering work of Rottinghaus et al. (2012) and Park et al. (2019) in summarizing and testing contemporary career development research led to an understanding of career adaptability as five major constructs: career agency, occupational awareness, negative career outlook, support, and work-life balance. An excerpt from Park et al. (2019, p. 713) describes these constructs:

> "Career Agency is the perceived capacity to reflect on and manage career transition, and Occupational Awareness reflects understanding of job market trends. Negative Career Outlook indicates negative thoughts or expectations regarding career, and Support is the level of perceived support from family and friends in career development. Lastly, Work-Life Balance is conceptualized as the ability to manage multiple life roles (Rottinghaus et al., 2012; Rottinghaus et al., 2017)."

Social cognitive carer theory outlines the ways in which individuals develop interest in careers and ultimately form decisions concerning their career. Social cognitive career theory seeks to explain how individuals select and develop themselves for careers, inclusive of their life experiences including personal interests and academic pursuits (Lent & Brown, 2013). Social cognitive career theory is an outgrowth of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory that focuses on interactions and experiences between one's environment, others and behaviors. An important career development construct, social cognitive career theory incorporates self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals – all interrelated factors influencing an individual's career choice (Lent et al., 2002). While social cognitive career theory has been used successfully to understand career decision making, (Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022), the relationship between social cognitive career theory and career adaptability has only slightly been explored (Stead et al., 2021). Yet, career adaptability is a specific strength, or self-efficacy, in the vein of social cognitive career theory (Johnston, 2016).

Career adaptability may help college students cope with personal and organizational changes in preparing for an Extension career, and an Extension internship may build career

adaptability among interns. Furthermore, it is believed when a college student has positive experiences in an Extension internship, notably using their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways, they are much more likely to plan for an Extension career. When considering career choice and career adaptability in the context of Extension internships, there is a substantial gap in the research

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to understand the extent of the NC State Extension Summer Internship Program on interns' career choice and career adaptability. The specific objectives were to:

1. Describe the demographic characteristics of Extension Summer Internship Program interns.
2. Compare the interns' intended career before and after the Extension Summer Internship Program.
3. Compare the interns' career adaptability (career agency, occupational awareness, negative career outlook, support, and work-life balance) before and after the Extension Summer Internship Program.

Methods

This was a descriptive quantitative study and used a one-group pretest-posttest design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). During their internship orientation, interns received a questionnaire measuring their level of career adaptability and career intention before their internship. After their internship, interns received the same questionnaire to compare the extent to which their level of career adaptability and career intention had changed, if at all.

Participants

The participants in this research project were NC State Extension interns during summer 2021. Interns were invited to participate in this study, and a consent form was shared with each intern. After interns reviewed the consent form, 15 of the 24 interns agreed to participate in the study.

Procedures

The Career Futures Inventory-Revised was used to assess participants' levels of career adaptability (Park et al., 2019; Rottinghaus et al., 2005; Rottinghaus et al., 2012; Rottinghaus et al., 2017). The Career Futures Inventory-Revised is a 28-item questionnaire measuring an individual's levels of career adaptability using five constructs: career agency, occupational awareness, negative career outlook, support, and work-life balance. The instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. An example question from the career agency construct is, "I can overcome potential barriers that may exist in my career."

Additionally, participants were asked to share demographic information, specifically their academic classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student) and gender on the pretest and intended career on both the pretest and posttest. The participants included their name only to match the pretest and posttest, and once the pretest and posttest were matched, their participant names were removed from the data file and replaced with a participant number.

Qualtrics Research Suite was used to deploy the pretest and posttest questionnaires. Email was used for correspondence with participants, and nonresponse was handled through follow-up emails to participants following Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2007). Three reminder emails were sent to participants for the pretest, and three for the posttest. These efforts resulted in a 100% response rate for the pretest and a 75% response rate for the posttest.

Pretest and posttest data were exported from Qualtrics Research Suite to IBM SPSS Statistics (Statistical Product for the Social Sciences) for analysis. Descriptive statistics used included frequencies, means, and percentages to allow for comparison of pretest and posttest responses. Cronbach's alphas were calculated post hoc, and the pretest had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.797 and the posttest 0.881 – consistent with previous research (Park et al., 2019; Rottinghaus et al., 2017). With small sample sizes and paired measures such as the pretest and posttest used in this study, the Wilcoxon signed ranks test, a nonparametric test, would be appropriate (Wilcoxon, 1945). However, this was a study of 15 interns, and the threshold for the Wilcoxon signed ranks test requires more than 15 (Mundry & Fischer, 1998).

Findings

Objective 1: Describe the demographic characteristics of Extension Summer Internship Program interns.

Regarding gender, 11 respondents (73.3%) indicated female and four indicated male (26.7%). Slightly more than one-half of respondents were classified as seniors (53.3%), followed by graduate students (20%) and sophomores (20%). The 15 respondents reported 12 different academic majors with two for Agricultural Science, Agroecology, Agricultural and Extension Education, and Plant Biology (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of Respondents*

Demographic Characteristics	*f*	%
Gender	(15)	(100)
Female	11	73.3
Male	4	26.7
Academic Classification	(15)	(100)
Sophomore	3	20.0
Junior	1	6.7
Senior	8	53.3

Demographic Characteristics	*f*	%
Graduate Student	3	20.0
Academic Major	(16)	(100)
Agricultural Production Systems	1	6.25
Agricultural Science	2	12.50
Agriculture, Food and Natural Resource Education	1	6.25
Agroecology	2	12.50
Applied Nutrition	1	6.25
Computer Science	1	6.25
Elementary Education	1	6.25
Environmental and Natural Resources	1	6.25
Forestry	1	6.25
Agricultural and Extension Education	2	12.50
Plant Biology[a]	2	12.50
History[a]	1	6.25

[a]One Plant Biology major was also majoring in History

Objective 2: Compare the interns' intended career both before and after the Extension Summer Internship Program.

Participants were asked to share their intended career before and after the internship program. Out of the fourteen respondents (one non-response), a little over half (53.6%) noted an intended career with Extension, specifically, two (13.4%) as Extension 4-H agents, five (33.5%) as Extension agents, and one (6.7%) as an Extension assistant concentrating on forest health. Respondents also had intended careers with agricultural, horticultural, and nutritional outreach and communication; agriculture teacher; developer; elementary teacher; paramedic; and registered dietician. Of the eight interns planning Extension careers prior to their internship, none deviated from those plans on the posttest. However, the internship program did help them identify specific Extension professional roles such as Extension family and consumer sciences agent, or Extension 4-H agent. Participant 12 did not identify an intended career on the pretest, but indicated the intention to be a farmer and/or horticulturalist on the posttest. Perhaps the most noteworthy change in intended careers was the respondent who changed from a paramedic to a horticulturalist (see Table 2).

Table 2

Intended Career of Respondents Before and After Extension Summer Internship

Participant Number	Intended Career Pre	Intended Career Post	Academic Major
1	Developer	Computer Science	Computer Science
2	Registered Dietician	Registered Dietician	Applied Nutrition
3	Agricultural, Horticultural, and Nutritional Outreach and Communication	Agricultural and Horticultural Education/ Communication	Agroecology
4	Extension Agent	Extension Agent	Environmental and Natural Resources
5	Paramedic	Horticulturalist	Plant Biology
6	Extension Agent	Extension or anything agriculture or in natural resources	Agricultural Production Systems
7	Extension Agent	Extension Livestock Agent	Agricultural Science
8	Extension 4-H Agent	Extension 4-H Agent	Agricultural and Extension Education
9	Extension Agent	Extension Family & Consumer Science Agent or Extension Livestock Agent	Agricultural Science
10	Extension 4-H Agent	Extension 4-H Agent or Extension Agriculture Agent	Agricultural and Extension Education
11	Elementary Teacher	Elementary Teacher/ Principal	Elementary Education
12		Farmer/ Horticulturalist	Plant Biology, History
13	Agriculture Teacher	Formal Secondary Agriculture Teacher	Agriculture, Food and Natural Resource Education

Participant Number	Intended Career Pre	Intended Career Post	Academic Major
14	Extension Assistant (Forest Health)	Extension Specialist	Forestry
15	Extension Agent	Extension Horticulture Agent	Agroecology

Objective 3: Compare the interns' career adaptability (career agency, occupational awareness, negative career outlook, support, and work-life balance) before and after the Extension Summer Internship Program.

Regarding individual interns' career adaptability, most respondents had an increase in career adaptability (9 of 15 interns) from pretest to posttest, and increases ranged from +11% to +57%. One participant remained the same in overall career adaptability. Five participants decreased in overall career adaptability and ranged from -4% to -64%. Of the respondents who indicated their intention to pursue an Extension career (participant numbers 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, and 15), four had a decrease in overall career adaptability and three had an increase in overall career adaptability. Of the respondents who indicated their intention to pursue careers outside of Extension, all reported increases except two; one respondent remained the same (participant 3) and another decreased by 4% (Table 3).

Table 3

Intern's Individual Overall Career Adaptability

Participant Number	Mean Pre	Mean Post	Change
1	3.89	4.21	+ 0.32
2	3.50	3.71	+ 0.21
3	3.21	3.21	0
4[a]	4.18	4.29	+ 0.11
5	3.81	3.96	+ 0.15
6[a]	3.64	3.79	+ 0.15
7[a]	4.21	4.07	- 0.14
8[a]	3.71	4.36	- 0.35
9[a]	3.64	4.04	+ 0.40
10[a]	3.50	2.86	- 0.64

Participant Number	Mean Pre	Mean Post	Change
11	3.54	3.71	+ 0.17
12	2.82	3.00	+ 0.18
13	3.43	3.39	- 0.04
14 [a]	3.64	3.54	- 0.10
15 [a]	3.68	4.25	+ 0.57

[a] Indicates respondent's Extension career intention.

Composite Overall Career Adaptability

Regarding the composite mean for the career adaptability scale, interns collectively increased their career adaptability by 14.5% form pretest to posttest. Regarding the five career adaptability constructs, respondents showed improvements from pretest to posttest in four constructs:

- Career agency (29.3% improvement) which includes the ability to "perform successful job search" and "understand my work-related values."
- Work-life balance (28.3% improvement) including being "good at balancing multiple life roles such as worker, family member, or friend."
- Negative career outlook (20% improvement), including energy to pursue career goals and confidence in the future of their career.
- Occupational awareness (15.5% improvement), including understanding and keeping current with job market trends.

For the negative career outlook subscale, disagreement is the positive response as all subscale items are negatively worded. Interns decreased their negative career outlook by 20%, an improvement. Interns perceived a decrease in support (10% decrement) which included "others in my life are supportive of my career" and "I receive encouragement from others to meet career goals" (Table 4).

Table 4

Interns' Change in Career Adaptability

Career Adaptability Constructs	Mean Pre	Mean Post	% Change	Change
Career Agency	3.980	4.273	29.3% ↑	Improvement
Occupational Awareness	3.389	3.544	15.5% ↑	Improvement
Negative Career Outlook	2.333	2.133	20.0% ↓	Improvement
Support	4.250	4.150	10.0% ↓	Decrement
Work-Life Balance	3.750	4.033	28.3% ↑	Improvement

Overall Career Adaptability	3.615	3.760	14.5% ↑	Improvement

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The vast majority of respondents were female undergraduates having achieved senior academic standing, consistent with Donaldson (2020) who noted the majority of Extension interns in a previous year were female. The academic majors of the respondents were diverse. Most of the respondents were planning an Extension professional career before the onset of their internship. However, the internship experience helped them to identify specific Extension professional roles such as Extension family and consumer sciences agent or Extension 4-H agent supporting the research that identifying and exploring specific professional roles is a salient career development issue (DeCenzo et al., 2013; Galbraith & Mondal, 2020; Rottinghaus et al., 2005).

The small number of respondents studied reported increases in overall career adaptability – specifically career agency, occupational awareness, work-life balance, and negative career outlook. Respondents showed the largest increases in career agency (29.3% improvement) and an increase in work-life balance (28.3% improvement). This aligns with a study conducted by Galbraith and Mondal (2020) in which participants realized how to manage time between job and life responsibilities, making it easier to create a healthy work-life balance when starting a career. However, one participant had a decrease of 64% in career adaptability. An explanation for this change is unknown in light of the other findings. A future study with post-internship individual interviews could offer insight into this concern.

Support is the perception of various forms of career assistance, including emotional, from one's family and friends (Rottinghaus et al., 2017). Support decreased for participants by 10% which includes "my family is there to help me through career challenges." It is important to consider this finding in the context of the internship program. Interns were away from their campuses, families, and friends for the summer. Additionally, families could have realized the demands of an Extension career (with numerous night and weekend commitments) and supported it less. The continuing COVID-19 pandemic and the precipitating social limitations could have further exacerbated the distance between interns and their support systems. Not only could COVID-19 have been a contributing factor for the decline in support, but it may have contributed to the increase in overall career adaptability as the COVID-19 pandemic has required substantial adaptation in all facets of life. On another note, this perceived decrease in support may have some relation to typical adult development and the typical transitions of early adulthood from school to work.

While this was a small study involving 15 interns, the data suggests the internship program is a constructive career experience to support the interns' aptitude for an Extension career. This is consistent with social cognitive career theory which reinforces the way individuals make decisions about their career (Lent et al., 2002). Specifically, Extension interns gain a first-hand view of Extension careers, community engagement, and County Extension Center Operations (Donaldson, 2019). Due to the limited research available on Extension internship

programs, this study may be useful to larger studies of Extension internships, career choice, and career adaptability.

Future Extension interns should complete the Career Futures Inventory-Revised to provide greater insight on career adaptability as a specific strength, reflective of social cognitive career theory (Johnston, 2016). Additionally, internship program coordinators should track the support subscale for interns over time. This is important to understand how support competencies may influence the internship experiences. To strengthen the support among interns, internship coordinators should share university and Extension level resources with interns. Additionally, a panel discussion featuring previous interns is suggested for the internship orientation. This would support interns in asking questions of experienced peers while building feelings of support and camaraderie.

Only 15 of the 24 interns (62.5%) agreed to participate in the study. It is recommended that internship programs dedicate a specified time during the internship work schedule to complete research questionnaires as this data is valuable for improving programs and career development activities including individual career counseling and internship programs. In the present study, the completion of the questionnaire was an extra step, outside of the typical internship program work schedule. To strengthen our understanding of career adaptability and career intentions, a qualitative study is recommended to describe career adaptability competencies among college students in academic majors aligning with Extension careers. This study was limited to individuals who were selected for each specific internship, and the selected interns likely demonstrated high levels of these career competencies. Future research is recommended with post-internship interviews to further evaluate decisions made by interns. These interviews may help researchers to gain a depth of understanding about career intentions and experiences of interns. For example, one intern in this study noted an intended career of paramedic on the pretest and horticulturalist on the posttest. Future research is recommended to explore how interns make decisions about their careers and interns' goals for participating in the program.

With only four male participants, a need exists to examine why male students are not actively pursuing Extension internship opportunities. Despite the wide range of roles available within Extension and the value of experience and skill development, male participation remains low. Further research to better understand this phenomenon may yield better recruitment and outreach efforts for creating an Extension workforce reflective of the communities served.

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