

# Team Members Perceptions of Benefits of Participation on a University Equestrian Team

Kathy Anderson<sup>1</sup> and Karr-Lilienthal<sup>2</sup>  
University of Nebraska  
Lincoln, NE



## Abstract

Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA) competitions were designed for undergraduate college students with various levels of horsemanship skills to compete as both individuals and as teams. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Equestrian team (UNL-ET) was a student organization and functioned as a club sport. In the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic year, 142 individuals (74 and 68, respectively) tried out for the 38 to 45 member team which was split into both western and hunt divisions. The UNL-ET conducted weekly riding practices and monthly meetings, participated in barn chores, conducted fund-raising activities, and hosted IHSA competitions each semester. At the end of the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 regional competition, UNL-ET members were asked to complete a survey. Nearly 80% of UNL-ET members indicated participation on the team had a positive influence on their life skill development. Furthermore, 78% of team members indicated that they learned to "be more adaptable to new situations" and "adjust to new situations quicker" after the UNL-ET experience. Participation on the team required a significant commitment; however, members indicated it was easy to devote time to team requirements. A very positive influence on student's overall undergraduate experience was indicated by 62% of UNL-ET members.

## Introduction

The Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA) is an organization that allows university students to compete in equestrian competitions individually and/or in a team format. In the 2009/2010 academic year, IHSA included teams from 350 member colleges and universities in 45 states and Canada (Intercollegiate Horse Show Association, 2010). In May of 2010, there were over 8,600 riders competing in hunt seat equitation, western horsemanship, and reining.

In IHSA competition, riders with various degrees of experience compete against those with similar riding experience, including novices. Students do not need to own a horse to compete, but utilize university owned or leased horses. In addition to competition, a goal of IHSA is to build team enthusiasm, good sportsmanship and student's life skills.

Undergraduate university equestrian teams are highly popular and are excellent aids for student recruitment (Gallager, 2000). Gallager (2000) showed that equestrian team participation increased from eight members in its inception in 1989 to a self-imposed limit of 65 members within four years. Furthermore, that study also reported a 394% increase in freshman students in animal science following the development of an equine science minor. Other studies have reported similar increases in enrollment and retention related to the addition of equine majors, options, and/or courses (Ames, 2000, Topliff, 2000, Wood, et al. 2010). However little has been reported on the benefits of students' participation on equestrian teams and in IHSA competitions. This study was conducted to determine how undergraduate university students' perceived their educational experience was affected by participation on a university equestrian team.

## Materials and Methods

### Team membership and requirements

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln equestrian team (UNL-ET) was initially developed in 1999 as a western team and a hunt division was added in 2009. The team functions as a recognized student organization and club sport. A coach and faculty adviser supervises the team, organizes team practices, and assists with club/team activities. A team of officers are elected by members each spring to assist with organization of activities for the upcoming season.

In order to practice and compete on the UNL-ET, students must be enrolled as a full-time student (minimum 12 credit hours per semester), be in good academic standing with the university (minimum GPA = 2.0), and successfully try-out for the equestrian team. Try-outs are open to all University of Nebraska-Lincoln students and consist of both a riding evaluation and brief interview. For the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons, a total of 142 students participated in UNL ET try-outs and teams of 38 (2009-2010) and 45 (2010-2011) members were selected. However, over the course of the two seasons, fourteen members (8 in 2009-2010, 6 in 2010-2011) left the team for various reasons (mid-year graduation, financial concerns, lack of time, academic eligibility and other personal reasons).

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, C204 Animal Sciences, Phone: 402-472-6414; Fax: 402-472-6362; Email: Kanderson1@unl.edu

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

The UNL-ET, students attend mandatory riding practices once a week with additional optional practices offered when possible. Students are also required to attend once-a-month meetings and complete approximately one hour of barn chores per week. These chores consist of cleaning stalls, grooming horses, and other routine barn maintenance. Required student membership dues were \$130 per semester and each team member was required to complete \$200 per semester of fund-raising. Fund-raising activities included selling program advertisements for home UNL-ET shows, assisting with local horse shows, selling t-shirts, and other miscellaneous activities. The team also conducts community service projects including “Boo @ the U” (a Halloween activity in the barn for local youth) and a Christmas toy drive. Funds cover travel costs, entry fees, and other team related expenses.

The UNL-ET competed in IHSA Zone 7 Region 1 in both hunt and western divisions. During the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 academic years, the western team competed in eight shows and the hunt team competed in six shows per year. The UNL-ET hosted five western shows per year as well as the regional western finals competition in 2010. Team members assisted in planning, organizing, and conducting all home shows. Additionally, there was potential for members to qualify as individuals for regional, semi-national, and national competitions each year.

### Survey Procedures

An on-line survey (Polldaddy.com, 2010) was developed following the 2009/2010 season to assess student perception of benefits of participating on a university equestrian team. The survey was made available to members in April 2010 and 2011 following regional competition. Regional competition completed the year for all team members other than those qualifying for semi-national and national competition. The survey, initially asked for demographic information such as student's undergraduate major, age, academic classification, and number of years on the equestrian team. Participants were then asked to respond to a variety of questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree). Survey questions were categorized to ascertain the influence of participation on the equestrian team on: 1) development of life skills, 2) requirements to be an equestrian team member, 3) general horse knowledge and equitation skills, and 4) overall undergraduate education. Team members were sent a link to the online survey with periodic reminders to complete the survey. The survey procedures were approved by the University of Nebraska – Lincoln's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### Statistical Analysis

The responses to each question were analyzed to see if there were differences in response among academic classification (classification) and number of years on the equestrian team (noyears) using SAS® PROC GLIMMIX (SAS Inst., Inc., Cary, NC, USA). Initial analyses for all responses included year and a year by classification or year by noyears interaction term. There were no significant interactions, so secondary analyses were run including year. There were no significant differences in responses between the two years, so the final analyses included only classification or noyears.

### Results and Discussion

Of the 69 members on the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 UNL-ET teams, 66% (n=46) completed the survey. It should be noted that 23 students or 33% of the team members either were no longer members of the team (n=14) at the time the survey was conducted or did not respond to the survey (n=9). Lack of responses from students who were no longer members of the team may have resulted in skewed data as students with issues related to participation on the team may have left the team or not responded. However, with a 67% response rate, a fairly large sample of team members was obtained.

Of those who completed the survey, 33.6% (n = 15) were seniors, 28.2% (n = 13) were freshman, and the remaining 39.1% (n = 18) were split between juniors and sophomores with the average age of all respondents 20.3 years of age. Furthermore, 95.6% (n=44) of the members were female and 4.3% (n = 2) were male. The majority of those responding (54.3%, n = 25) had been on the team only one year, 26.0% (n = 12) for two years, and 17.3% (n = 8) were team members for three to four years.

Animal Science majors made up 41.3% of those responding (n = 19) and the remaining were a wide variety of majors (biological systems engineering, language studies, marketing, agricultural business, merchandising, business administration, etc). These are similar to the demographics of all 142 students who initially tried out for the team as 58.4% (n=83) were majors in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR) and 68.6% (n=51) of the CASNR students were Animal Science majors. The remaining 41.5% (59 students) were from a variety of majors such as education and human services (n=13), arts and sciences (n=13), college of business administration (n=7), journalism and mass communications (n=4), architecture (n=1), engineering (n=2) and general studies or undeclared (n=9). Ten students did not provide major information. Furthermore, 75.4% (n=107) of those trying out for the UNL ET had not previously been on the team. Also, it should be noted; however, current UNL-ET team officers were not required to try-out. Therefore, an equestrian team appears to attract students from numerous majors and interests throughout the university.

## Team Members

### Life Skills

The greatest benefit of equestrian team participation appeared to be the impact on developing personality traits and life skills essential for future professional growth (Table 1). The most positive influence on life skills identified by members included 1) working with others, 2) communication, 3) behavior around horses, 4) responsibility, 5) team work 6) organizational skills, and 7) relating to different people. There were no differences ( $p > 0.05$ ) in mean scores due to academic classification or number of years on the equestrian team.

Additionally, one highly valuable component of equestrian team competition was the ability to adjust and adapt to unfamiliar horses moments before competing on them. Horses are randomly drawn and contestants mount, adjust their equipment and compete in the designated class (IHSA Rule V, 2010). No “warm-up” time was permitted. Team members indicated they learned to be “more adaptable to new situations” (mean score = 1.91) and felt they could “adjust to new situations quicker” (mean score = 1.98) after the equestrian team experience (Table 1). Furthermore, unlike most other equestrian competitions, riders compete not only as individuals, but also as a team. During equestrian team competitions, the horses are generally ridden in several different classes and often by various team members. Therefore, riders in early classes analyze their mount and communicate to their team members as to how to get the best performance from each horse. Additionally, students gained organizational skills and experienced the importance of teamwork through planning and conducting numerous fund-raising activities and hosting equestrian team competitions.

Little has been documented on the advantages of being on a University equestrian team; however others have reported the positive benefits of working with horses on life skills (Bizub et al., 2003; Brickell, 2005; Smith et al., 2006). Additionally, Wood et al. (2010) reported students enrolled in university equine courses had reduced stress and increased self-confidence. Furthermore, other undergraduate competitive activities, such as intercollegiate judging, have also reported similar life skill enhancements (McCann, 1991, McCann and McCann, 1992, Nash and Sant, 2005). Students participating in intercollegiate judging competitions have increased communication and decision making skills, increased industry

knowledge and improved team work (Field et al. 1998). Also, McCann and McCann (1992) stated that livestock judging provides youth who have an interest in the livestock industry the opportunity to develop necessary skills for their futures and their careers. Similar benefits were reported by Nash and Sant (2005) in which 97% of 4-H judging alumni indicated the judging experience had a positive influence on their personal success.

**Table 1. Impact of Participation on a University Equestrian Team on Undergraduate Experience and Life Skills**

	Mean <sup>xy</sup>	SD
I learned how to work well with others.	1.65	1.18
I learned the importance of effective communication skills.	1.71	1.10
I understand proper personal behavior around horses.	1.74	1.32
I am more responsible because of my involvement on the Equestrian Team.	1.80	1.11
I can work well within a team.	1.80	1.38
I learned the importance of organizational skills when working with people.	1.82	1.07
I can relate to people with different personalities.	1.85	1.25
I am more adaptable to new situations after being on the Equestrian Team.	1.91	1.22
I am a better leader because of my involvement with the Equestrian Team.	1.91	1.24
I can adjust to new situations quicker after being apart of the Equestrian Team.	1.98	1.17

<sup>x</sup> On a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), n=47

<sup>y</sup> Mean score was unaffected ( $P>0.05$ ) by academic classification or number of years as a UNL-ET member

### Equestrian Team Requirements

Being a member of an equestrian team was considered an important commitment for undergraduate students (Table 2). There were no differences ( $p > 0.05$ ) in mean scores due to academic classification or number of years on the equestrian team. Students were neutral on the team requiring a large amount of personal time (mean score= 2.76), but did indicate that it was easy to devote time to the requirements of the team (mean score = 1.93). However, there were a few students (n=14) who withdrew from the team during or at the end of the first semester due to time constraints (n=4), financial concerns (n=4), personal issues (n=3) academic eligibility (n=2) and mid-year graduation (n=1).

Participation on the team required a minimum of three to four hours per week and potentially up to three days per week when traveling to competitions. The typical week involved one night of practice (1-2 hr), completing barn chores (1 hr), and periodically participating in evening fund-raisers. Students indicated that living off campus verses on campus did not affect their ability to participate on the team (score mean = 3.71). The UNL campus is split geographically, with a “City Campus” and “East Campus.” Students who resided on City Campus had to travel approximately five miles by bus or car to attend practices in the Animal Science Arena, located on East Campus.

Team members indicated they received clear instruction from the coach (mean score = 1.86) and could get individual help if needed (mean score = 1.89). For the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons, the UNL-ET utilized a part-time contracted coach and a separate faculty adviser. The coach focused on improving rider skills during practices, traveling to competitions, and assisting with fund-raising. The faculty adviser's role was to assist with student organizational needs such as financial management, travel arrangements, organizing competitions and general team business.

regards to the new coach included “Loved our coach, she strives to help us and offered additional practices which really helped” and “Even being a first year member on the team, I can tell the members of this team are working together and learning more efficiently than they had in years past. I really do believe this has to do with our new coach and advisor.”

Team members were required to share in the general care, stall cleaning, and grooming of the horses. A limited number (n = 20) of horses were available for use by the over 38-member equestrian team and these horses were also utilized for several other undergraduate equitation courses. Therefore, team members were taught to skillfully handle the horses, notice any signs of lameness or soreness, and be cognizant of overall general horse health.

A positive relationship between total horsemanship and life skill development had been previously reported (Smith et al., 2006). They suggested that horse programs focused on life skill development should emphasize horsemanship skills, safety, health management and nutrition. Additionally, Schultz et al. (2007) reported building a relationship with horses promoted confidence, relationship skills and problem-solving skills in the persons involved with horses. Additionally, interactions with horses have a positive influence on self-esteem of adolescents (Saunders-Ferguson, et al., 2008). That study indicated equine activities may provide beneficial results including increased self-esteem, physical exercise and positive youth development. By participating in horsemanship activities, adolescents can learn new skills and gain experiences useful for positive self-esteem development (Iannone, 2003). Iannone (2003) evaluated the influence of a vocational and therapeutic riding program on severely emotionally disturbed adolescents and found participation in horsemanship activities and interaction with horses to be very beneficial for increased self-esteem.

**Table 2. Undergraduate Equestrian Team Member Perception of Team Requirements for Participation**

	Mean <sup>x,y</sup>	SD
The coach was very helpful and gave clear instruction.	1.86	1.34
I was able to receive individual instruction if needed.	1.89	1.28
It was easy to devote time to the requirements of the Equestrian Team.	1.93	1.27
Participating on the Equestrian Team required a large amount of personal time.	2.76	1.17
Living on/off campus affected my participation on the Equestrian Team.	3.71	1.53

<sup>x</sup> On a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), n=47  
<sup>y</sup> Mean score was unaffected (P>0.05) by academic classification or number of years as a UNL-ET member

**Horse Skills**

Equestrian team members gained appreciation for quality horse care, horsemanship, training and behavior when working around horses (Table 3). Nearly 83% indicated they had a better understanding of proper horsemanship and the amount of time it takes to care for horses. Furthermore, 80.4% strongly agreed or agreed they understood the importance of proper horse training. Over half of the survey responses were from first year UNL-ET members which could attribute to the greater improvement in team member's horsemanship skills being attained in the first years of equestrian team participation. Additionally, in the semester immediately prior to the 2009/2010 year the UNL-ET experienced a coaching change which may also have contributed to the increased understanding of horsemanship by the newer members. Comments from team members in

**Table 3. Undergraduate Team Members Showed Increased Horse Management, Training and Equitation Skills Following Equestrian Team Participation**

	Mean <sup>x,y</sup>	SD
I better understand proper horsemanship.	1.63	1.25
I understand the amount of time it takes to care for a horse.	1.72	1.41
I understand the importance of proper training of a horse.	1.80	1.45
I better understand the anatomy of a horse.	2.47	1.31
I have improved understanding of biology as it relates to horses.	2.63	1.10

<sup>x</sup> On a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), n=47  
<sup>y</sup> Mean score was unaffected (P>0.05) by academic classification or number of years as a UNL-ET member

## Team Members

**Table 4. Influence of Participation on a University Equestrian Team on Student Involvement and Undergraduate Education Experience**

	Mean <sup>x,y</sup>	SD
I would like more hands on experiences like this in college.	1.87	1.39
I am more likely to return to UNL next fall to participate on the Equestrian Team.	1.87	1.46
As a member of the Equestrian Team, I feel I am making an impact on the University.	2.02	1.29
I consider myself a highly involved student because of the Equestrian Team.	2.07	1.25
Being on the Equestrian Team motivated me to be a better student in class.	2.09	1.38
I was able to interact with UNL faculty because of the Equestrian Team.	2.18	1.42
I was able to apply what I learned in my other university classes to the Equestrian Team.	2.30	1.17
Being on the Equestrian Team helped to prepare me for a career.	2.30	1.30

<sup>x</sup> On a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), n=47

<sup>y</sup> Mean score was unaffected ( $P>0.05$ ) by academic classification or number of years as a UNL-ET member

### Influence on Undergraduate Experience

Equestrian team members indicated that the UNL-ET experience was an asset to their overall undergraduate experience and instilled a certain amount of university “pride” (Table 4). Students who were in their first (mean score = 1.68) or second (mean score = 1.50) year on the team were more likely ( $P=0.01$ ) to want more hands on experiences like participation on the team as part of their college experience compared to students in their third year on the team (mean score = 3.5). This difference may be due to differences in involvement on campus as students are further in their academic careers. Students indicated a very positive influence of the UNL-ET on their motivation to return to UNL the following fall semester (mean score = 1.87). Additionally, 73.3% of UNL-ET members felt very strongly they had a positive influence on the University (mean score = 2.02), were highly involved in the University (mean score = 2.07), and were more motivated to succeed in their classes (mean score = 2.09). Such motivation and involvement aids in student retention, plus helps to build loyal alumni.

The UNL-ET members were comprised of majors from all across the University with just over half in the animal science major. However, many non-animal science students enroll in animal science equine related courses and indicated a strong application of their course work to the UNL ET experience. The equestrian team appears to recruit non-animal science majors into animal science courses, thus increasing student credit hours generated in the animal science department.

Similar impacts of student retention and the enhanced educational value of an undergraduate program involving equine courses and activities have also been reported (Taylor and Calderone, 2001, Wood et al., 2010). Students in those studies strongly agreed equine courses helped them to develop skills as well as had a positive impact on their undergraduate education. Increased emphasis on advising, goal setting and

equine skills resulted in an 85% retention rate in Equine Science majors (Taylor and Calderone, 2001). Furthermore, in a study of Colorado State University equine science alumni, only 56% of alumni indicated they were directly employed in the horse industry. However 84% reported being either very satisfied (38%) or satisfied (46%) with their equine science degree and education (Denniston and Russell, 2007). Although students enrolled in equine courses may not have lifelong careers in the equine

industry, the educational program has a positive impact on recruitment and retention of students.

### Summary

In general, students indicated they perceived positive impacts from their university experiences and their personal life skills by participating on an IHSA equestrian team. While there were significant commitments of time and finances on the part of the students, it did not impact their desire to participate in the organization.

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