

Introduction

The Office of Departmental Management (DM) continues to revitalize its internship program as a part of the work of the Cultural Transformation Team. At the DM's request, the Program Evaluation and Improvement Staff (PEIS) have once again conducted a survey to assess newly developed recruitment strategies and ensure the Pathways Program produces deliverables that appropriately link to the USDA's Strategic Plan. The overall purpose of this survey is to continually evaluate the student internship experience, identify areas for improvement and make recommendations to enhance the internship experience for all students. The USDA Pathways Program is the latest program change to the student internship program.

Methods

An online questionnaire was administered to assess student intern satisfaction with the program. PEIS programmed the survey and provided a web link to the Student Development Program Manager. The Program Manager sent the web link to 21 student intern coordinators who then forwarded it to approximately 5100 student interns for completion. One thousand student interns completed the survey for a response rate of approximately 20%, which is lower than last year's response rate¹. The survey included questions that ranked student satisfaction with various aspects of the application process, the onboarding process, and students' reasons for applying to the Pathways Program, their career interests, and other components of the overall internship experience. The survey also collected student demographic data. For many survey questions, a Likert-type scale was used to rate student satisfaction as 'Very Satisfied', 'Somewhat Satisfied', 'Not Satisfied', or 'Not Applicable'. A number of the survey questions also included an open-ended comment section to elicit more detailed opinions of the student internship program and the overall internship experience. Both the quantitative and qualitative survey data collected for this evaluation are detailed in the findings below.

Results

The evaluation results are organized according to the survey question topics and common themes that emerged from both the quantitative data and the qualitative comment sections.

Intern Demographics

The survey posed demographic questions to respondents including gender, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, and Agency. Additional questions in this section covered the students' career interests and the type of internship program that they were affiliated with. All responses are detailed in the charts below (see charts 1-7).

¹ Last year the response rate for this survey was 30%.

Chart 1. Intern gender (n=907)

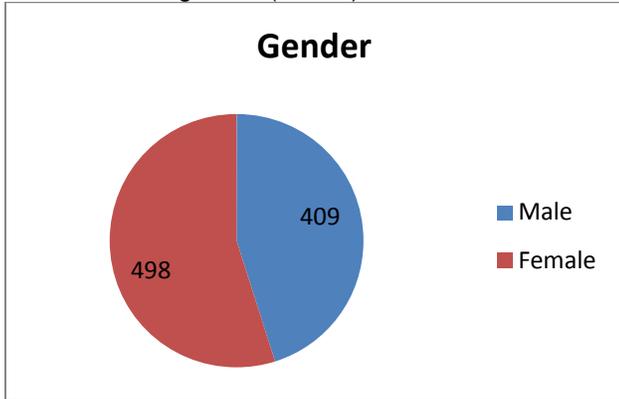


Chart 4. Education level as of 10/2012 (n=898)

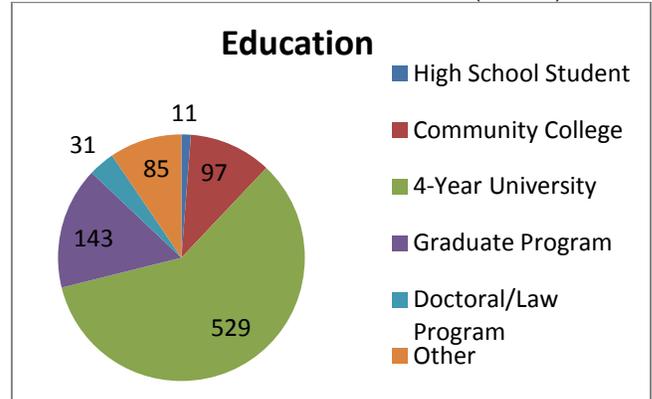


Chart 2. Intern race (n=907)

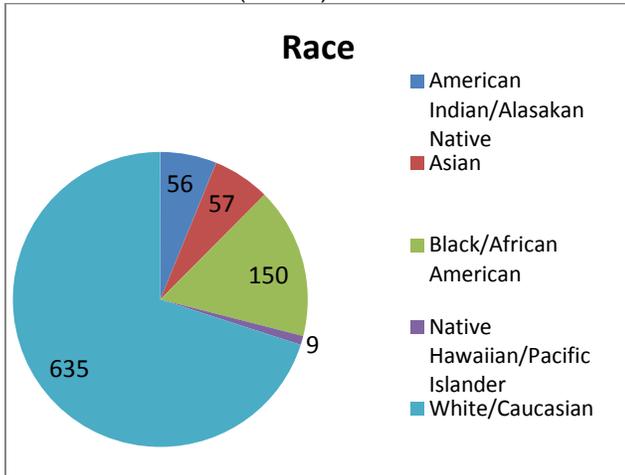


Chart 5. Agency where intern worked (n=913)

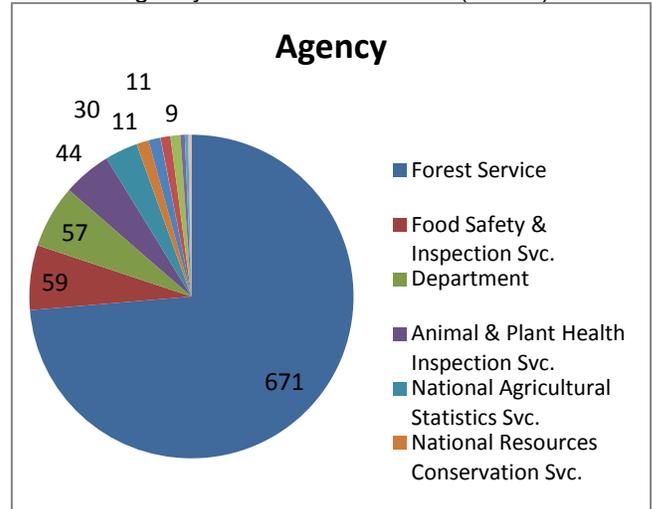
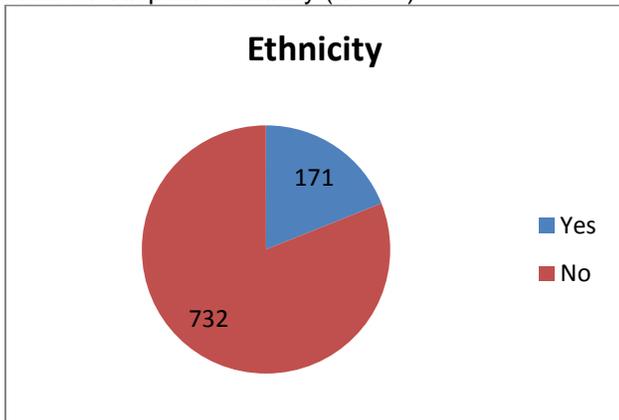


Chart 3. Hispanic ethnicity (n=903)



Charts 1-2 show that the responding interns were predominantly female and White/Caucasian. Also, the majority of respondents do not identify themselves as Hispanic (see chart 3). Over half of all survey respondents were currently enrolled in or had recently graduated from a four-year university² (see chart 4). Most of the students who completed the survey were interns with the Forest Service (see chart 5).

² The 'Other' response for the education question included students that had recently graduated and were no longer enrolled in any degree program.

Chart 6. Career field of interest (n=893)

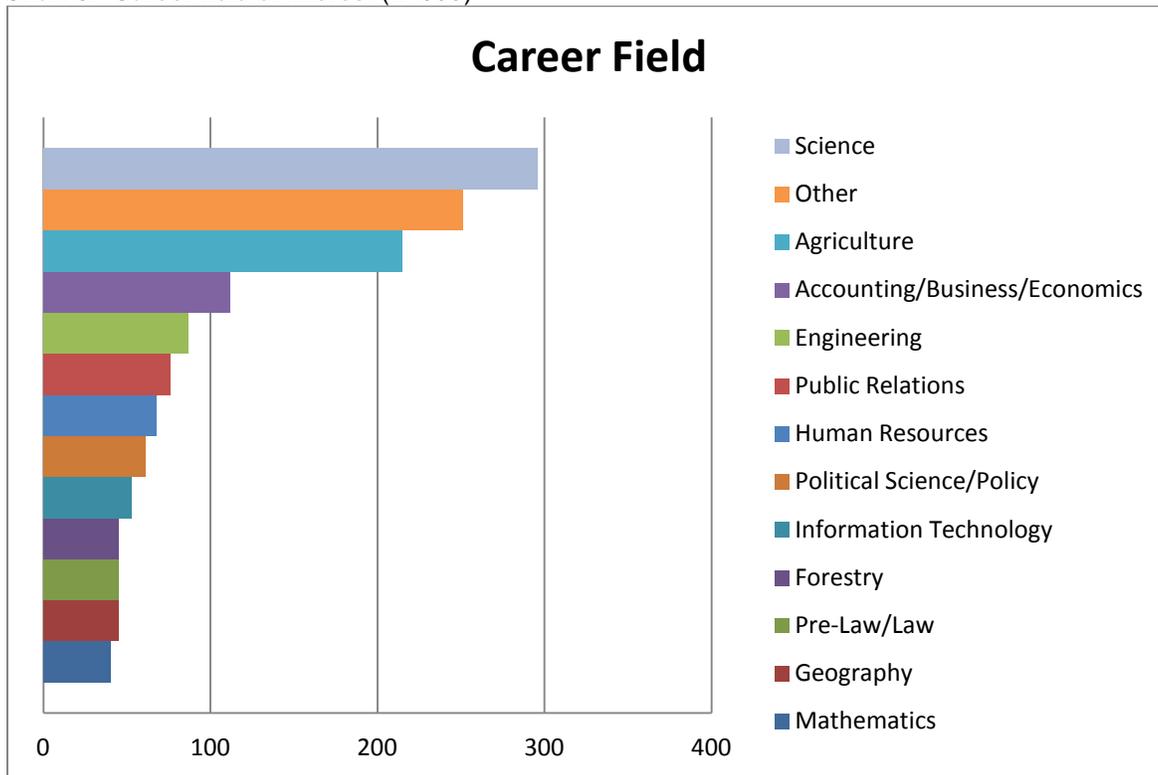
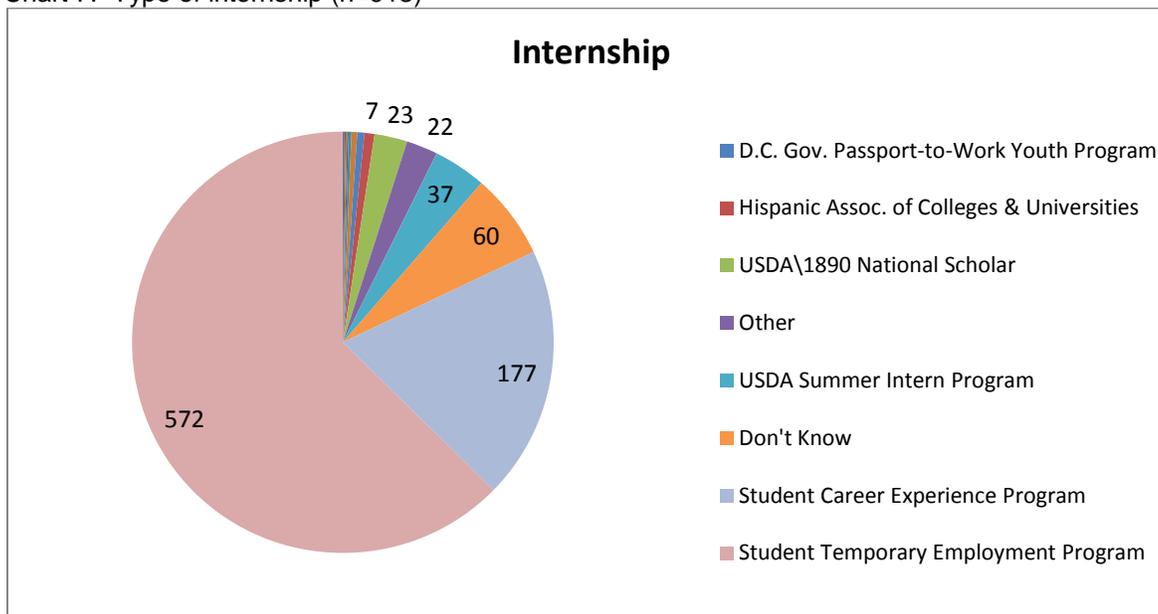


Chart 7. Type of internship (n=913)



The career interests of the respondents included many different fields of study (see chart 6). Most students responded that they were interested in pursuing a career in either 'Science' or 'Other'³.

³ The 'Other' responses given for career interest included statistics, criminal justice, archaeology, and education.

Agriculture was the second most frequently mentioned field of study among the student respondents. According to chart 7, the majority of respondents identified their internship program as either the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) or the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP).

Internship Marketing

Students learned about the USDA internship program in a variety of ways. Most students reported that a current USDA employee informed them of the program, almost as many students indicated that they were a returning USDA intern⁴ (see chart 8).

Chart 8: How did you learn about the USDA internship program (n=1000)

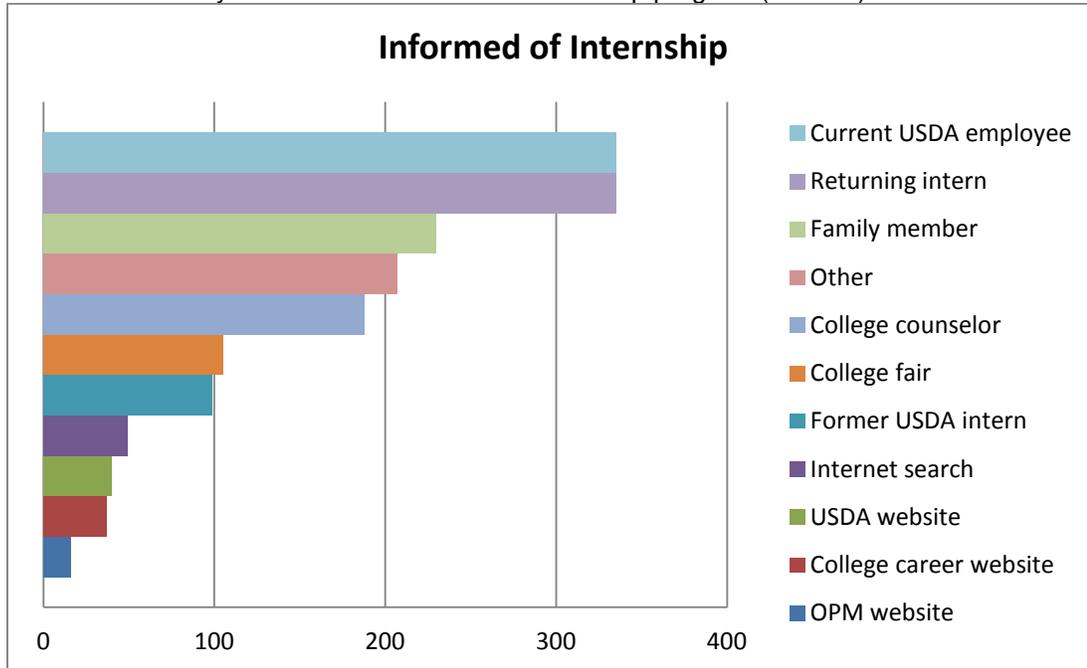
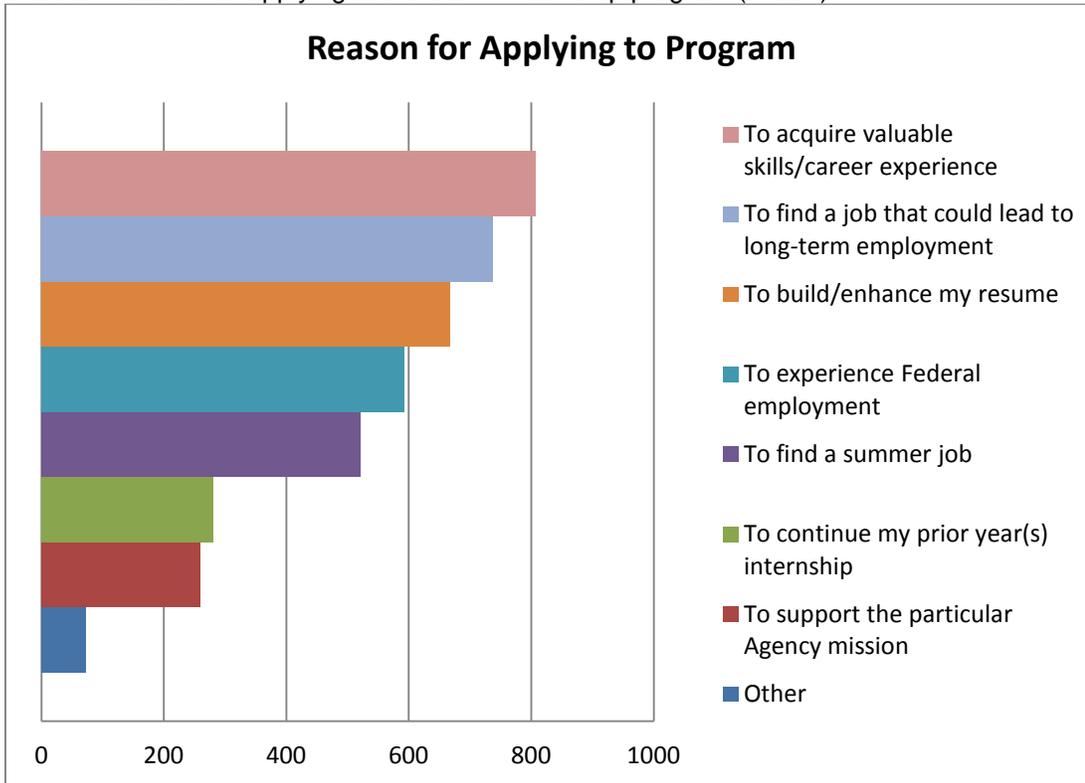


Chart 9 details the reasons why the respondents applied to the USDA internship program. The most common answer selected was 'To acquire valuable skills and career experience'. Respondents were allowed to select more than one response for this question. The next two most frequently selected responses were 'To find a job that could lead to long-term employment' and 'To build/enhance my resume'.

⁴ 'Other' responses for the question about how they were informed of the internship program included a referral from a high school teacher or college professor, the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) and the individual was a former volunteer at USDA.

Chart 9. Reason for applying to the USDA internship program (n=997)



In addition to the reasons provided above, interns also wrote their own reasons why they applied to the internship program. Some of the more common 'Other' reasons given included "to obtain college credit", "I wanted to work outdoors", and "to fulfill requirements for school".

Application Process

Several questions regarding the internship program's application process were included in the survey. The following section covers survey questions regarding the application process, information received prior to beginning the internship, the first few days on the job and overall satisfaction with the application and on-boarding processes. Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the application process (see charts 10-14).

Chart 10. Satisfaction: hard copy application (n=947)

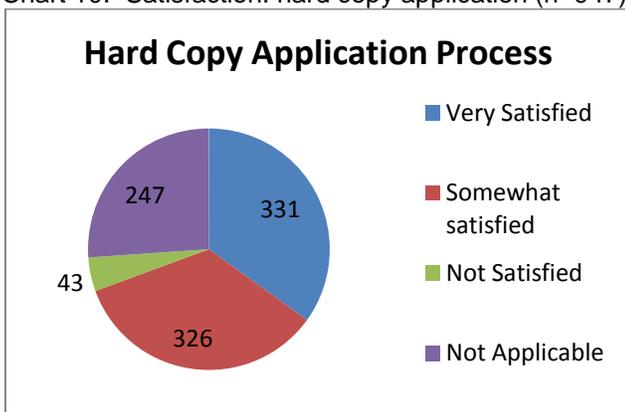


Chart 11. Satisfaction: online application (n=947)

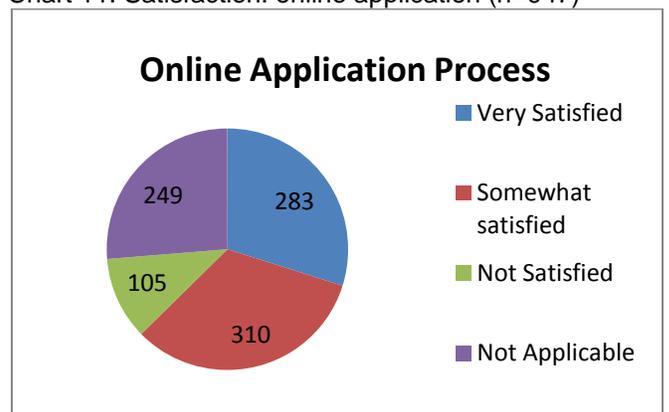


Chart 12. Satisfaction: application completion time (n=947)

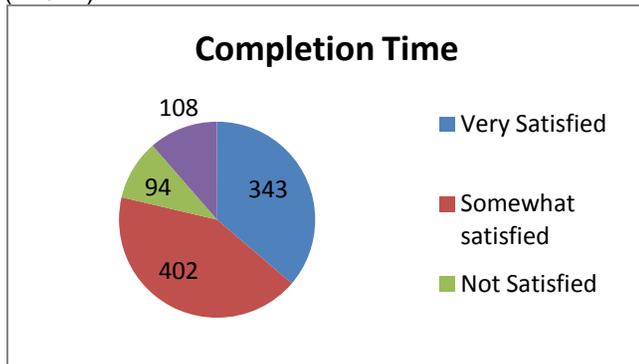


Chart 14. Satisfaction: Offer made in time for informed acceptance decision (n=947)

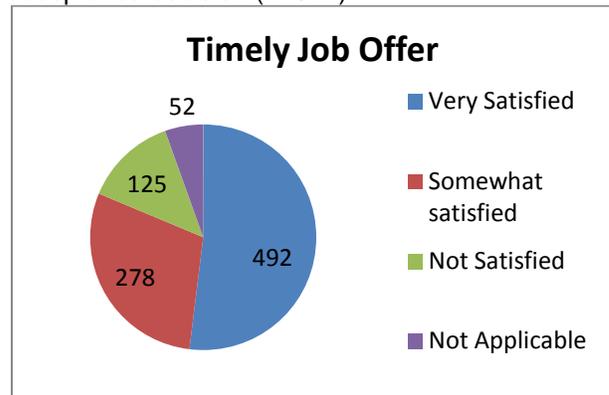
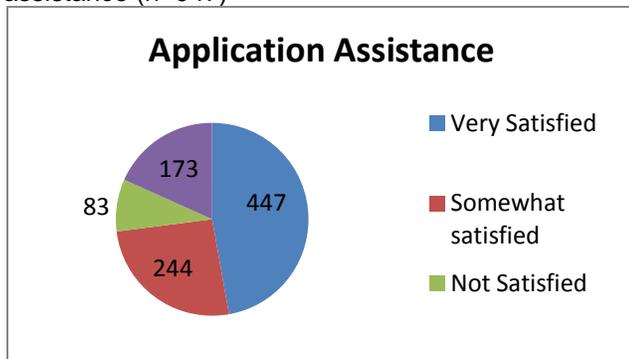


Chart 13. Satisfaction: contact for application assistance (n=947)



The majority of respondents were either 'Very Satisfied' or 'Somewhat Satisfied' with the application process. The number of respondents who selected 'Not Satisfied' was highest for the question regarding the timeliness of the job offer (see chart 14), indicating that some students felt their job offer was not received in a timely manner. The responses further indicated that in some cases the USDA internship job offer did not come soon enough for the respondent to make an informed and timely acceptance decision.

Respondents offered many additional comments on the application process. Several students had trouble with the Avue online application.

"The Avue website was extremely hard to navigate, especially for jobs on smaller forests."

"The student portal site was not very browser-friendly. Despite removing pop-up blockers and running in compatibility mode, I still could not log in."

Students also commented on the problems that they experienced completing the fingerprinting procedures.

"The timeline for fingerprinting should be better because the fingerprint chart needed to be in by 4 days and my local police department only devotes 2 days of the week for fingerprinting. The packet should be sent out earlier."

"I received the packet for fingerprints and other forms past the deadline that it was due."

As with last year’s survey results, students again commented that the delays in the application and hiring process caused additional dissatisfaction.

“Documents that pertain to reporting for duty came one business day before the official start date.”

“I received notice of my appointment six months after my interview.”

“It took four months to let me know if I got the job. Other jobs that I applied for needed an answer sooner than that so I had to make a difficult decision to wait or retract my app.”

Despite the issues that some students encountered with the application procedures, there were several comments from students describing their positive experiences with the application process.

“My contact was the most excited and impressed me by sounding like he had passion for the job he does.”

“The timely response from the student coordinator was a key in my decision to come to USDA.”

A series of questions concerning the information they received prior to beginning the USDA internship was also included in the survey (see charts 15-19). This information included the correct position title, salary information, duty location, time and date to report as well as which materials to bring on the first day of work.

Chart 15. Received correct position title (n=946)

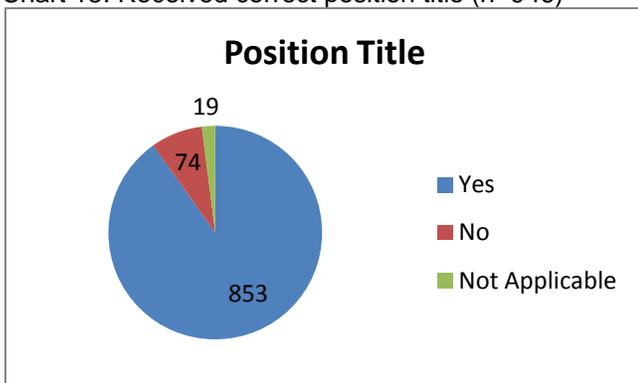


Chart 17. Received specific location for duty (n=946)

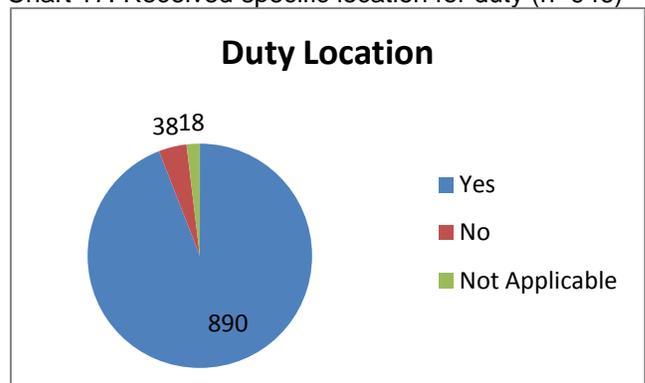


Chart 16. Received correct salary information (n=946)

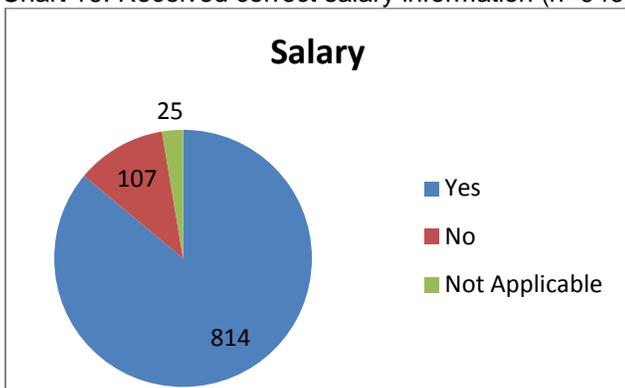


Chart 18. Received time and day to report (n=946)

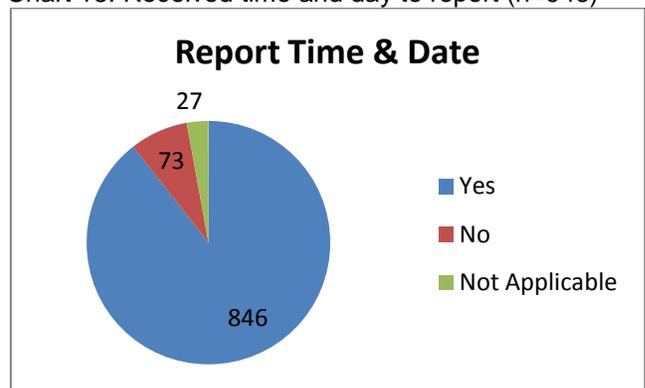
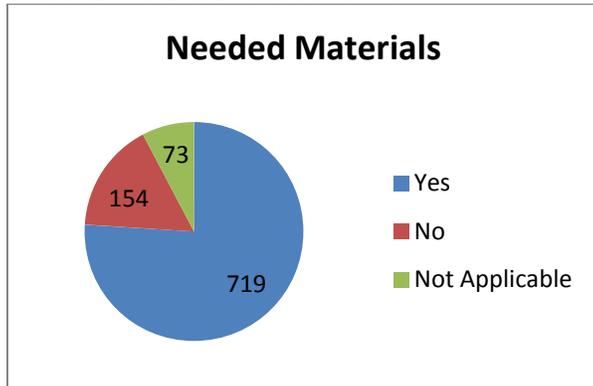


Chart 19. Materials needed for work



Most respondents received all of the necessary information before their first day of work. As seen in charts 15, 16, 17 and 18, most students responded that they received the information on their position title, duty location and their report time and date before the first day. While the majority of students had no problems receiving information, materials that were needed for the first day was not provided to all interns as other necessary information (see charts 19).

Additional comments received regarding receipt of all necessary information prior to the first day of work indicated that some respondents did not receive information in a timely manner. Comments indicated that information was received late which made housing decisions more problematic and obtaining assistance from HR also proved difficult.

“HR contact was not responsive, not informative and did not provide me with an official acceptance with title, grade, start date, etc. Did not return emails or phone calls, very frustrating onboarding process.”

“There was difficulty with online access when I called the helpline for assistance, I didn’t get a call back for over 4 weeks, after my employment begun.”

“Would have been nice to have a little more time to find housing etc. I only had a week between the offer and my start date.”

“I did not receive housing information until the Wednesday before my Monday start date.”

“Some sort of program that stays in touch with housing opportunities in the area could be beneficial.”

An additional set of questions on the survey covered the respondents’ first few days on the job. This set included questions about orientation, workspace, expectations, and the benefits from the internship experience. Responses to this set of questions are detailed in charts 20-26.

Chart 20. Agency orientation program attendance (n=932)

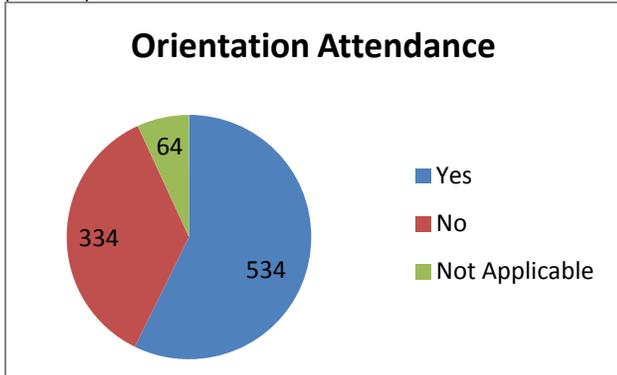


Chart 23. Positions expectations were explained (n=932)

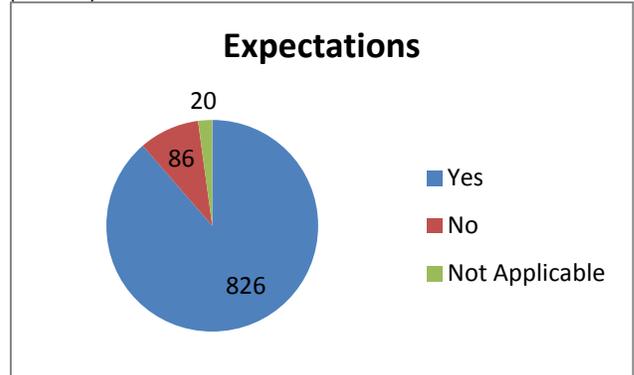


Chart 21. Meaningful/helpful Agency orientation (n=932)

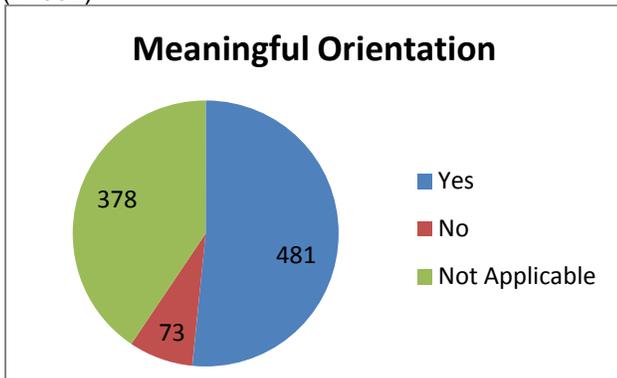


Chart 24. Feel welcomed on your first few days (n=932)

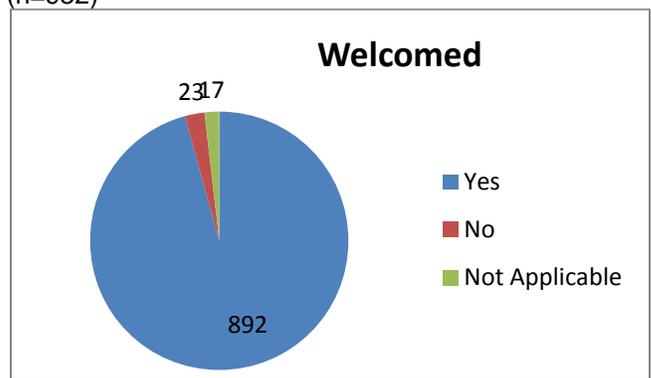


Chart 22. Workspace was function when reported to work (n=932)

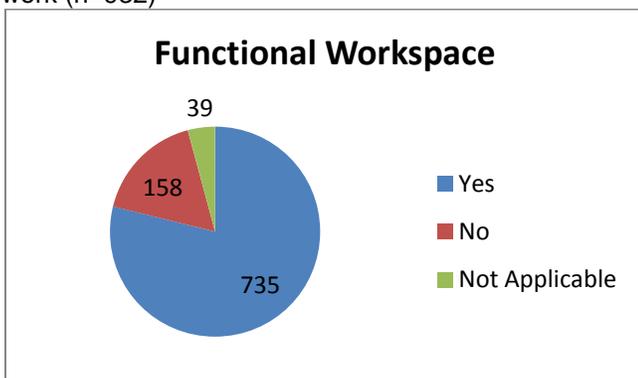


Chart 25. Tasks were good use of knowledge and skills (n=932)

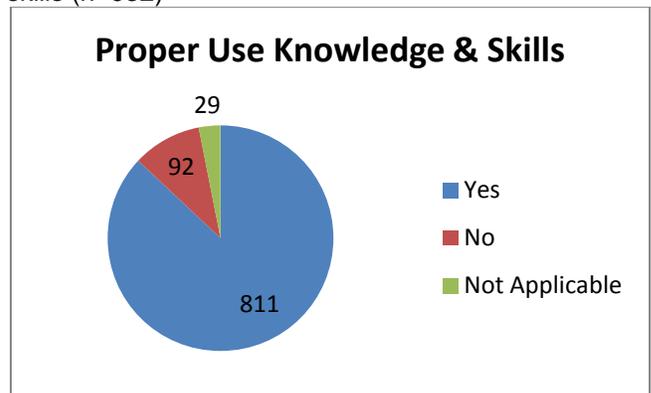
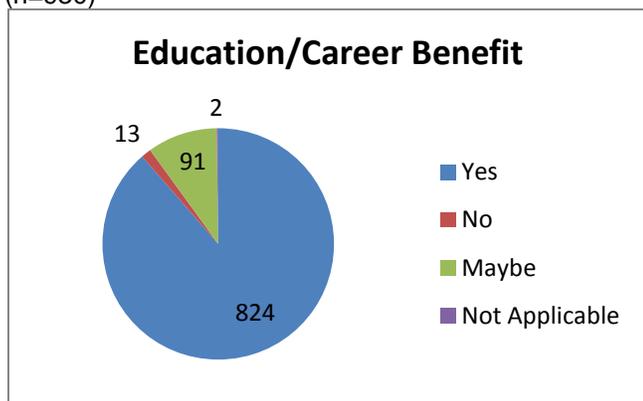


Chart 26. Education/career will benefit from internship (n=930)



While over half of the respondents indicated that they attended orientation, a significant number of students (36%) did not attend any orientation (see chart 20). For those who attended orientation, the format greatly varied. Orientations ranged from large group orientations at the Agency level to one-on-one orientations with a direct supervisor. A majority of interns responded that their workspace was functional and ready for them to occupy when they reported for work on the first day (see chart 22). Most respondents also felt that the expectations for them were clearly explained (see chart 23). Nearly all of respondents indicated that they felt welcomed when they reported to work. Also, most respondents believe the internship experience was a good use of their knowledge and skills and will benefit their career and also felt the internship (see charts 25 & 26).

When interns were prompted to share additional comments regarding the orientation process, the responses were numerous. Comments regarding the orientation experience were mixed. Some interns remarked that they enjoyed the orientation.

“District orientation went well. I think it would have been good if all the new interns on the Forest Service were networked so if a problem arose a peer group could help with a solution.”

“I attended the orientation put on by my group and found it extremely beneficial.”

“I was given a orientation session by forest managers that was applicable to the job.”

Several interns did not receive any orientation or felt that what was offered was insufficient.

“The mandatory orientation was geared to new employees not interns. Talked about benefits, insurance, union, etc. did not pertain to the interns.”

“I have been a STEP student for nearly 10 years and not once was I invited or required to attend an orientation for interns.”

“Since I am a returning intern it was a little repetitive to hear all the same presentations for a third year in a row.”

A few interns offered suggestions for future orientations, especially for interns who arrived after orientation or did not attend an orientation.

“An orientation on the agency, its history, mission, goals, challenges, etc. would have been nice or at least a package of information that I could read through on my own (if no orientation is available).”

“A brief (one page) synopsis of expectations for the season and of the overall project would be greatly appreciated.”

“They need to have a new employee’s booklet or orientation to explain e-authentication and all the little bits and pieces that you need to complete.”

Finally respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with several areas of the internship program including, the application process, personnel matters, supervision on the job, expectations and the quality of work assignments. To conclude the section, respondents were asked if they plan to pursue a career with the USDA and if they would recommend a USDA internship to others. Overall satisfaction with each area of the internship program and pursuing a career at the USDA is detailed in charts 27-34 below.

Chart 27. Overall satisfaction with the application process (n=921)

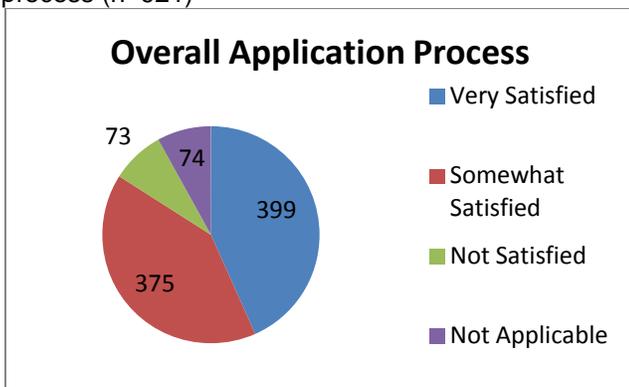


Chart 29. Overall guidance on the job (n=921)

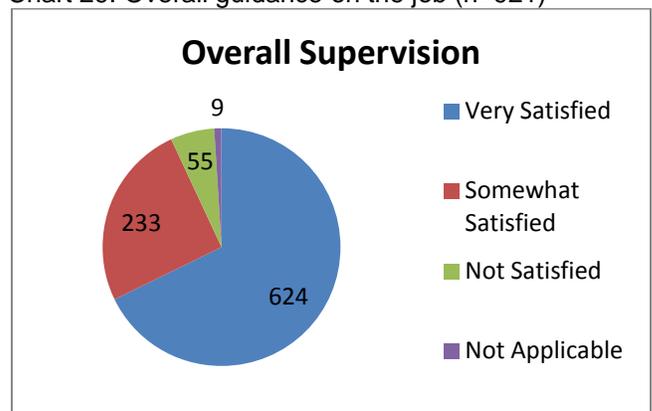


Chart 28. Overall ease of completing personnel matters (n=921)

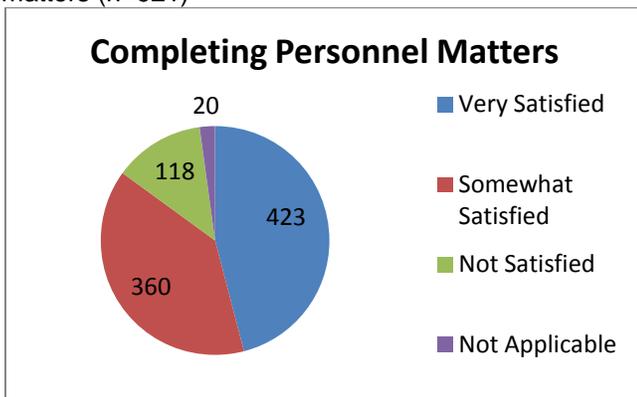


Chart 30. Overall job expectations made clear (n=921)

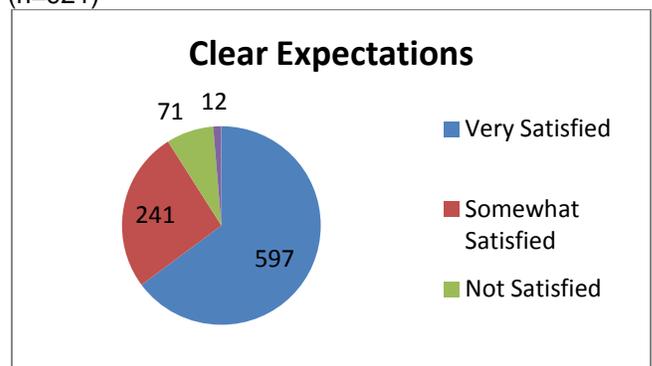
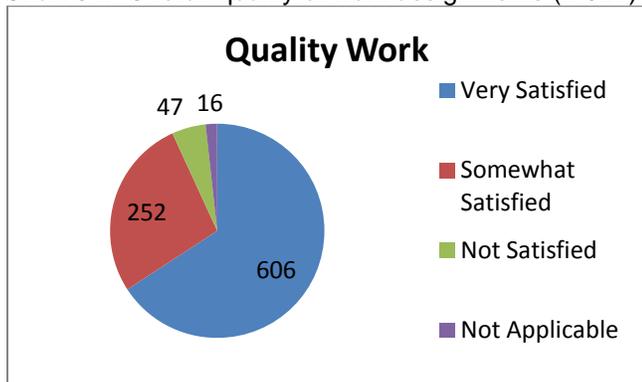


Chart 31. Overall quality of work assignments (n-921)



The data revealed that the majority of students responded that they were 'Very Satisfied' in every question regarding the overall internship experience (see charts 27-31). The smallest percentage of 'Very Satisfied' was seen in the overall application process and the overall ease of completing personnel matters (see chart 27 & 28). Most interns were 'Very Satisfied' with the quality of the work assignments that they were given as indicated in chart 31.

Overall comments from the responding student interns included frustration with the quality of assignments that they were given.

"First few work assignments were very trivial. I shredded papers for almost 8 hours on my first day. Not a very good first impression of the Agency."

"I have skills and capabilities that are not being utilized in my current intern position. This being my third summer, I should be working in a position where I can contribute to the mission of the Agency."

"I understand how everyone in the office is busy and things can be hectic, but it would be nice to have assignments lined up before I report back every summer."

Another a common theme among the additional written comments was the difficult on-boarding process. Obtaining computer access was an area of dissatisfaction for many interns.

"My supervisor was not prepared or organized for my start date and it took over a month just to get a desk space cleared so that I had somewhere to work."

"Instructions for requesting a login/eAuth ID/GovTrip profile were nonexistent. These should be provided to new interns and supervisors should be reminded of these instructions prior to intern arrival."

Based on the comments provided, there is also a need for clearer communication. Students expressed that they wanted clearer instructions from HR on completing the necessary paperwork

Chart 32. Recommend a USDA internship to others (n=917)

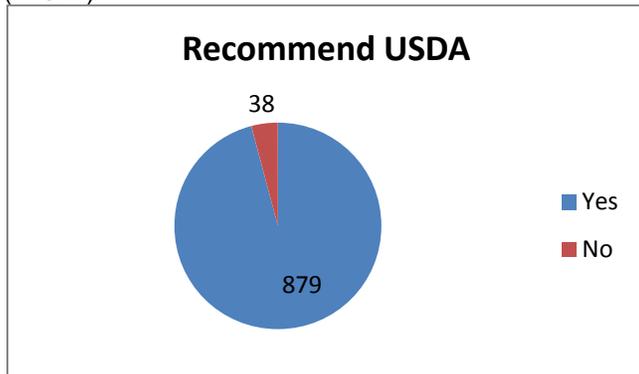
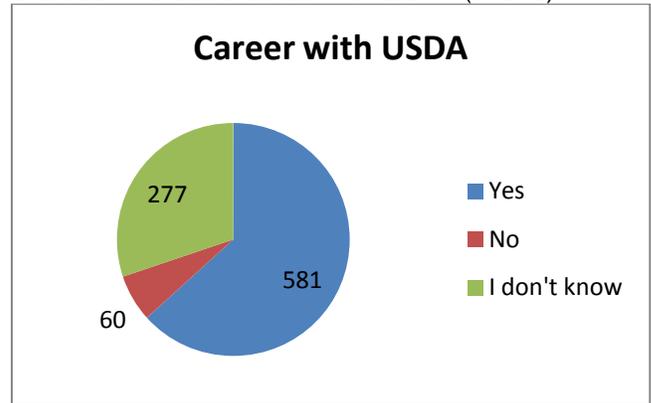


Chart 33. Pursue a career with USDA (n=918)



Nearly all respondents were either ‘Very Satisfied’ or ‘Somewhat Satisfied’ with the internship program. An overwhelming number of all respondents indicated that they would recommend a USDA internship to others (see chart 32). Over half of all respondents indicated that after completing the internship, they plan to pursue a career with the USDA (see chart 33). A small percentage responded ‘No’ to pursuing a career with USDA and a number of interns responded ‘I Don’t Know’ to the question. Students were further asked to comment on why they do not plan to pursue a career in the USDA. Many comments simply stated that their career goals do not correspond with the work done at the USDA. Some respondents indicated that they were not interested in Federal employment due to the bureaucracy involved.

“I do not plan to pursue a career with USDA because of the amount of red tape and bureaucratic requirements that stifle innovation and enthusiasm.”

A few comments also indicated that bad experiences with a supervisor were the deterrent from seeking a career with the USDA.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the information gathered in support of this evaluation and serve to improve the student internship program. The recommendations included below are proposed for the Department’s consideration:

- **Establish one point of contact within each Agency for all application questions**

It would be helpful for students to have one point of contact for all application related questions. One contact would ensure that all students receive the same application instructions and information. This would also ensure that students do not receive conflicting information when they contact HR with questions.

- **Send out job offers and all related information in a timely manner**

Students apply for many internship opportunities, receiving a USDA internship offer in a timely manner will ease the decision-making process and aid the student in the housing search as well.

➤ **Revise the orientation program at the Agency level**

Each Agency should establish their own orientation program specifically for students, which will explain the Agency's mission and goals. Gear the orientation program toward new interns and have a shorter program for returning interns who are already familiar with the Agency. Orientations help students understand how their internship plays a role in achieving Agency goals.

Conclusion

Overall, the data from the survey indicate that the student internship is a positive experience. A few improvements would further increase student enthusiasm about their internship as well as future employment with the USDA.