

Perceptions of forestry students change through years of study

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A study of undergraduates in a five-year Brazilian forestry program finds that what students perceive as important change as they progress through program. These differences suggest ways to improve forestry curriculum and create more attractive forestry programs to reverse the global decline in forestry student enrollment.

Javier Arevelo and others from the University of Eastern Finland, as well as [scientists](#) from the Federal University of Paraná, where the study was conducted, report their findings in the 2010 *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*, published by the America Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America, and the Soil Science Society of America.

The aim of the study was to investigate differences in students' perceptions across study years of a higher education forestry program. Students reported their forestry related concerns, rated their perceived value of competencies and experiences, their preferred work areas, and where they would pursue a Master's program.

Across the five years of student experience, the researchers found that student later in their educational careers have a much broader variety of forestry concerns. The most frequent concern among first-years was conservation, but later-year students were just as likely to mention production, sustainable management, or forest legislation and policy.

Improving forestry curriculum will involve identifying what attracts

students to the field. The authors suggest that since beginning students perceive conservation as an important concern, conservation-related issues should be incorporated into first-year studies, to capitalize on that interest.

The study also found that later-years students were more likely to give higher importance to competency related to traditional forestry areas (such as silviculture and management policy) and generic communication skills, such as oral and written communication. The authors suggest that this is a positive finding, as previous academic work has pointed out the need for improved communication skills for forestry graduates and professionals.

While the study did not find much variation on items related to experience, the importance of excelling academically decreased across study years, while the importance of having a good social life increased across study years. The authors suggest that this may signal dissatisfaction or de-motivation linked to a perception that academic achievement is not appropriately awarded.

Students in their finals years showed a greater diversity in their preferred areas of work, and showed an increasing support for consultancy. This may have been influenced by their growing awareness of their expertise, as well as interaction with their professors who perform consultancy work.

While the majority of students at the beginning of their studies prefer to continue for master programs at the same university, by their later years they equally preferred either the same university, a different university, or studying abroad. While this may represent the natural development of expanding expertise, the authors suggest it could also reflect dissatisfaction with their studies, and a progressive loss of interest in continuing their studies at the same university.

The findings from this study offer new insights into the perceptions of forestry education and employment, putting efforts for reform curricula on stronger footing. While areas and competencies that students put less emphasis on should not be dropped from the curriculum, their perceptions offer a perspective of the motivation, engagement, and effort that [students](#) gain and experience in their educational careers.

More information: View the abstract at www.jnrlse.org/issues/

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