The Changing Face of the Range Student

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We recognize that as national concerns and emphasis change, generations of students reflect this change. Range management was a field for country-bred males, or so it seemed, up until a few years ago. Now, faculty of most range schools are noticing changes in the demographic background of their students. Employers and members of the public who deal with young range professionals have said that today's student is better educated in technical aspects than ever before but they often lack "savvy." How are we as range professionals going to meet this new challenge? Do we need curriculum changes in our colleges and universities which will insure "practical, hands-on" kinds of training? Should employers devote a period of on-the-job training to provide background skills? Perhaps we need these things and more. But first, let's take a look at the changes which are being observed in our range schools.

A questionnaire was sent to representatives of each of the member schools in the Range Science Education Council. Of these, thirteen schools responded. The schools which responded generally demonstrated similar trends. No school reported fewer range majors in 1977 than in 1967 and only four indicated a leveling off of student numbers since 1972. Student numbers have doubled or tripled for many schools.

Range is apparently not a particularly popular field for minorities or foreign undergraduates, with only 2 or 3 students falling into either category at any given school which responded. There has been a remarkable increase in female students over the past 10 years, however. Of the schools responding to this questionnaire, an average student population consisting of 20% female students was reported. This is a very significant trend when one recognizes that none of these schools had any female undergraduates 10 years ago and there were only a few women enrolled 5 years ago!

Another significant trend was the increase in students with an urban background. Several schools indicated that more than half of their students came from a rural background. However, most indicated that less than half, and in some cases as few as 30% of their students came from rural settings.

Several schools indicated that a number of their students were working toward two B.S. degrees simultaneously. Generally these have been range and wildlife or range and forestry curricula. These data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic trends of range students from 13 Range Science Education Council member schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1967</th>
<th>1972</th>
<th>1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of undergraduates</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of females</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of minorities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of foreign undergrads</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/rural ratio</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual majors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Employment success</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>88*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data were collected during the 1977-78 school year. Therefore may be somewhat low since many of these students had not actively entered the job market yet.

Finally, the reporting schools indicated that the employment picture has been consistently good. Individual comments concerning employment suggest that the employment "edge" seems to go to:

- "Women"
- "Range students with rural backgrounds"
- "Students with diverse natural resource management, not just range-livestock production"
- "Students with high grade point averages"
- "Women and ethnic groups have an edge within their grade point average groups"
- "Students with summer experience in either federal agency or university research projects"
- "Students willing to go wherever the job is"
- "Ranch backgrounds, especially if coupled with high grade point averages"
- "Students who do well in school have the edge but all of our students who want jobs seem to be finding them"  

Other comments which were received include:

- "Range management skills are increasingly needed in areas which are not traditional. We have tried to stress flexibility and reasoning out solutions rather than acceptance of cookbook approaches."
- "Vagaries in Civil Service rules seem as important as anything in placing students."
- "Many students in other fields are taking range courses. Most are trying to meet minimum Civil Service requirements for Range Conservationist."
- "Many students from eastern states are transferring into range. Considerable interest is exhibited in the generalized concept of natural resource inventory use and management. This concept, of course, has been developed for some 10 to 20 years but it appears to me that there is an extreme necessity for us to emphasize the role and national importance of livestock grazing on rangelands."

It is apparent that range is appealing to increasing numbers of students. It is also apparent that women are assuming a greater role in natural resource management than ever before. It seems that more students from the cities are developing an interest in range. I see all of these as positive trends. However, with these changes come challenges which we must face. I believe that we must work to strengthen Civil Service requirements to insure that only technically trained people are eligible for Range Conservationist positions. I believe that some sort of an "internship" would help those students who lack rural skills and an understanding of rural attitudes make the transition into the range profession. Finally, college and university advisors must now, more than ever, recognize that the students we are seeing today are much different from those of previous graduating classes.

[1] Those schools participating in this survey included California Polytechnic State University, Fort Hays State University, Iowa State University, Montana State University, Oregon State University, South Dakota State University, Texas Tech University, University of Florida, University of Idaho, University of Montana, University of Nebraska, University of Wyoming, and Washington State University.

[2] Editor's Note: Range Science Education Council means all colleges and universities in Mexico, United States and Canada teaching range management.