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Promoting food safety among undergraduate students

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The Universidad del Este (UNE) is in its second funding year of a grant titled, Development of a Bilingual Minor in Food Safety. This grant is funded by USDA-CSREES, HEP (2008-38422-19236). The main objective of the grant is to establish an undergraduate academic and research program in food safety. One of the proposed strategies is to educate undergraduate students about food safety and present them with an opportunity to complete a minor in this area. In 2009, an on-line survey was conducted to ascertain the knowledge and perception on Food Safety among 364 undergraduate students enrolled in the School of Science and Technology. However, the response rate was only 14%. This year we implemented a different strategy carried among a population of 428 undergraduate students. We conducted an aggressive promotional campaign consisting of classroom visits, distribution of educational brochures, and announcements of the program throughout the campus. Moreover, we administered an AGMUS-IRB approved questionnaire to the students enrolled at our School. A total of 167 undergraduate students voluntarily answered the questionnaire. Seventy one percent were female and 29% male. Almost 40% of the responses were from freshmen students. Forty nine percent (49%) of the students were Biology majors, followed by 13% and 27% from Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology majors, respectively. Forty four percent of the students are planning to continue graduate school, while 43% are considering attending medical school. Only 18% plan to seek full time employment upon graduation. In terms of food safety, 43%, 22% and 10% answered that their knowledge on this subject was average, good and excellent, respectively. Interesting, 71% knew about the School's effort to create a minor in food safety. Also, 60% answered they would be interested in obtaining this minor, while 70% would be available to participate in research projects related to food safety. These results present a clear depiction of the interests of our undergraduate students to continue towards completing a graduate or professional degree. They also indicate the student's interest in the area of food safety, both in terms of completing a minor as well as carrying out research. Through this grant we will continue to monitor students academic and research involvement in the area of food safety. Based on this study, we can predict that this new academic program will be very successful among undergraduate students in our School.

Key Words: food safety, undergraduate research, academic minor program

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