Doggone it: There's not enough information about high school doggy daycare programs!

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Introduction

As the United States continue to urbanize there is a need for agriculture programs to adapt by creating courses that appeal students who are unfamiliar with production agriculture (Hogen & Sherman, 2000). Veterinary programs are viewed as a means for increasing enrollment in agricultural programs (Morrish & Callen, 2010); particularly because veterinary programs have become increasingly competitive (UC Davis, 2018). Danielson et al. (2012) found that being proficient in technical skills such as performing surgery, analyzing test results, and developing research capabilities were important for skills needed to be successful in the profession. However, Zenner et al. (2005) stated that being proficient in soft/nontechnical skills are also crucial for success in the workplace. Soft/nontechnical skills are defined as "the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator." (Robles, 2012, p. 457). Veterinary programs are tasked with producing graduates that are proficient in both technical and nontechnical skills.

Doggy daycares are a new component of veterinary programs that are becoming more common and can be defined as a place that "provides owners with a safe, fun, stimulating environment for their dogs to play off-leash with other dogs with the careful supervision of a trained staff" (Bennet, 2005, p. 12). In the context of agricultural programs, doggy daycares involve school staff bringing their dogs in for a day of grooming and exercise, while the students can obtain hands on experience and learn about running a business (Hillsborough County Public Schools, 2020). Agricultural educators are looking for support to invest in veterinary programs (Morrish & Callen, 2010) and as students have positive perceptions of doggy daycare programs (Pinto & Foulkes, 2015), this may be an avenue for teachers to expand their program.

Anecdotally students love doggy daycare programs which allow them to practice their vet skills on live animals. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence about how effective these programs may be in helping veterinary programs teach their students desired technical and nontechnical skills. Agriculture teachers debating whether to implement a doggy daycare program do not have data to regarding the effectiveness of these programs, which may make it difficult to justify the investment of such a program. Research should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of doggy daycare programs as a component of high school veterinary program.

Methodology

This study was conducted as part of the National FFA Agriscience Fair Program with the goal to assess the effectiveness of doggy daycare programs by specifically looking at high school students' confidence levels in their technical and non-technical skills gained through their participation in a doggy daycare program. As this study was an FFA Agriscience Fair project it did not require IRB approval, and was exploratory in nature. The authors developed an online survey instrument that sought to evaluate students' confidence in technical vet skills, soft-skills, and attitudes towards the doggy daycare program. The instrument included close-ended questions on demographics, Likert questions on attitudes towards the program, and open-ended response questions. The survey was administered online to Timber Creek High School students enrolled in a doggy daycare program during Spring 2020 (prior to Covid-19 school closures). The instrument was e-mailed to 329 students, of which 71 responded to the survey (a response rate of 21.6%) and the data was analyzed using SPSS. Frequency, means, and standard deviations were calculated.

Results to date

The results from this exploratory Agriscience Fair project determined that there is merit in researching the benefits of including doggy daycare programs into veterinary science programs. Participants responded that the doggy daycare improved the practical skills necessary for working in a veterinary's office (M=4.41, SD=0.645), and 92.9% (N=65) of participants have learned more veterinary skills through the hands-on program rather than hands-off textbooks. Regarding non-technical skills, students agree that the doggy daycare has positively impacted their interactions with others (M=4.13, SD=0.653), but that the program may not be as effective in teaching communication skills regarding client-specific situations (M=3.8, SD=0.904). In addition, students felt that the doggy daycare program promoted a positive image to the community (M=4.63, SD=0.587).

The results from this project show that doggy daycare programs may have a positive impact in helping students expand their knowledge and confidence regarding technical veterinary skills as well as providing students with an opportunity to develop their nontechnical social skills. Implementing doggy daycare programs into existing agricultural programs may strengthen programs by providing students with a competitive edge to get into veterinary schools. They may also be utilized as recruitment tool for agricultural programs that are in more urban settings by appealing to students who may be less interested programs that are focused more on production agriculture. The results from this project also indicated there may be areas within doggy daycare programs that agricultural teachers may need to address to increase the program's benefits (ex. providing more client-specific situations for students to practice their skills). Measuring the benefits of doggy daycare programs can help provide agricultural teachers with data needed to justify the costs of running such a program.

Future plans

The results from this study cannot be used beyond providing researchers with a direction to conduct future research because of the lack of IRB approval, the limitation of using a convenience sample with one program, and the survey instrument not being tested for reliability or validity. Research should be conducted utilizing research procedures that can increase the validity, reliability, and generalizability of the study. The instrument used to conduct the study should be assessed in terms of reliability and validity prior to be used in any further research. The study should also be re-conducted using a random sample of participants in doggy daycare programs across the United States to assess the effectiveness of these programs and increase generalizability. Results from this future study should be disseminated to agricultural teachers who have or are interested in adding a doggy daycare program to their veterinary program to provide support in investing in this type of program (Morrish & Callen, 2010).

Resources needed

As the instrument used in this study will need to be examined, individuals who are knowledgeable in survey design will be needed to assess the reliability and validity. A list of agricultural programs that have a doggy daycare will be needed to expand the scope of the research. Software (such as Qualtrics) that can collect survey responses from a large sample will be needed as well as data analysis software such as SPSS. The time and commitment of researchers need to also be considered if this expanded study is to be completed.

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