

Strengthening Soft Skills: An Evaluation of FFA Leadership Conference Participants' Soft Skills Development

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Employers globally and across disciplines request that an emphasis be placed on soft skills development in the education of our future workforce (Mohan et al., 2018; Robles, 2012). While students tend to prioritize technical skill development, employers are consistent in their call for a complementary educational approach where technical and soft skills are developed simultaneously to produce a quality workforce candidate (Robles, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020). More specifically, within the agricultural industry, employers are calling for communication, critical thinking, and time management skills from college graduates (Crawford & Dalton, 2012; Easterly et al., 2017; Erickson et al., 2018). A variety of activities within school-based agricultural education programs including career development events, supervised agricultural experiences, and agriscience research projects have shown to have a positive impact on students' soft skills development (Freeman, 2017; Haddad & Marx, 2018). Continued implementation, evaluation, and investigation of these educational programs are necessary to increase soft skills development and overall workforce preparedness in our future agricultural industry leaders (National Research Council, 2012; Stripling & Ricketts, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to compare high school agricultural education students' self-perceptions of their soft skills before and after participation in a statewide FFA leadership conference to evaluate the effectiveness of conference experiences in positively influencing students' soft skills development. Results of this evaluation can inform conference coordinators of the effectiveness of the current conference curricula to make a positive impact on students' soft skills development and identify areas that could be improved.

This study incorporated Kolb's Experiential Learning Model: a cyclical process in which students engage in a new experience, reflect on their observations, create concepts based upon these observations, and then apply these theories (Kolb, 2014). The FFA conference mirrors this cycle as it allows students to experience, reflect on, conceptualize, and experiment with their soft skills development. Additionally, Kolb's model was selected as it complements the agricultural education three-circle model (Baker et al., 2012), and has been used in a similar study that found participation in a FFA public speaking competition had a positive effect on soft skills development (Freeman, 2017).

Methodology

This quasi-experimental study evaluated 1,280 high school agricultural education students participating in sophomore and junior-level California FFA leadership conferences in the spring of 2021. These two-day conferences were hosted virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions. The pretest and posttest were administered via an online survey tool in asynchronous modules. The Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ-H), developed by Neill et al. (2003), was utilized to capture students' self-perceptions of their soft skills. The LEQ-H measures confidence in the following eight soft skills constructs: Achievement Motivation, Active Initiative, Emotional

Control, Intellectual Flexibility, Self Confidence, Social Competence, Task Leadership, and Time Management. The instrument consists of 24 Likert-type items in which participants indicate if the statement is “not like me” (1) to “like me” (8). Neill et al. (2003) established instrument reliability through a study of 960 participants resulting in a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) value of .945 and a relative noncentrality index (RNI) value of .959, both indicating a well-fit model. In addition to LEQ-H responses, demographic data were gathered including gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, and years in an agricultural class. Paired samples t-tests with a 95% confidence interval were used to determine if there was a significant difference between the grand mean scores on the LEQ-H between the pretest and posttest. Additional analyses were performed to determine if significant differences existed across the eight constructs within the sophomore and junior-level conference groups.

Results/Findings

Pretest and posttest responses were received from 196 of the 1,280 conference participants for a response rate of 15.3%. Results of the paired samples t-test showed a pretest grand mean of 147.35 ($SD = 22.58$) and a posttest mean of 156.39 ($SD = 22.00$), which revealed a significant ($p = .00$) increase in the overall perceived soft skills level by participants and resulted in a moderate effect size (*Cohen's d* = .72). The sophomore and junior-level conferences were independently analyzed and showed both conference groups had significant ($p < 0.01$) increases between pretest and posttest scores with a medium effect size (*Cohen's d* = .64; .79). Seven of the eight soft skills constructs exhibited significant increases across all participants: Active Initiative ($M = 18.73$ vs. $M = 19.96$), Emotional Control ($M = 16.07$ vs. $M = 17.42$), Intellectual Flexibility ($M = 19.22$ vs. $M = 19.84$), Self Confidence ($M = 19.11$ vs. $M = 20.50$), Social Competence ($M = 17.79$ vs. $M = 19.19$), Task Leadership ($M = 18.03$ vs. $M = 19.31$), and Time Management ($M = 16.83$ vs. $M = 18.39$). The construct of Achievement Motivation ($M = 21.58$ vs. $M = 21.77$) did show a positive increase, however it was not significant ($p = 0.11$).

Conclusions/Recommendations

Overall, participation in the virtual sophomore and junior-level FFA leadership conferences moderately benefited students' soft skills levels, which is consistent with current literature on the effectiveness of experiential learning activities on agricultural education students' soft skill development (Freeman, 2017; Haddad & Marx, 2018). Nevertheless, curriculum improvements are needed for more positive gains in the area of Achievement Motivation, a skill focusing on work ethic and ambition. Conference coordinators are encouraged to review curricula to determine effective experiential learning activities to increase participant skills within the construct of Achievement Motivation. As agricultural employers call for employee competencies in self-management and dependability, potential improvements in the curricula will result in participants being more career-ready and desirable in the agricultural industry (Crawford & Dalton, 2012; Easterly et al., 2017). Additional data is required to assess the breadth of soft skills development delivered by the California FFA Leadership Continuum on high school agricultural education students. It is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to monitor and evaluate conference participants as they move through the continuum to measure the total impact of these experiential learning activities on their soft skills development.

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