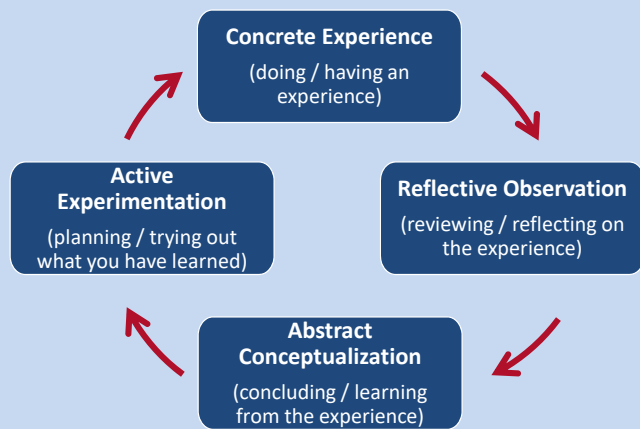


Strengthening Soft Skills: An Evaluation of FFA Leadership Conference Participants' Soft Skills Development



Theoretical Framework

This study incorporated Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. The FFA conference mirrors this cycle as it allows students to experience, reflect on, conceptualize, and experiment with their soft skills development (Kolb, 2014). Kolb's model 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).

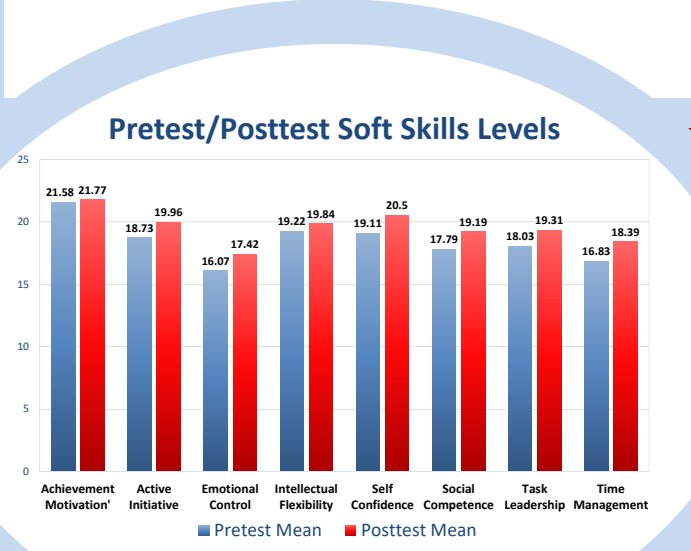
Methods

This quasi-experimental study evaluated 1,280 high school agricultural education students participating in two-day virtual sophomore and junior-level California FFA leadership conferences in the spring of 2021. The pretest and posttest were made available via an online survey tool in asynchronous modules. The Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ-H) captured students' self-perceptions of their soft skills as it measures confidence in eight soft skills constructs. The instrument consists of 24 Likert-type items; 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. 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 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.

Introduction

Employers globally request that an emphasis be placed on soft skills development in the education of our future workforce (Mohan et al., 2018). Within the agricultural industry, employers are calling for communication, critical thinking, and time management skills from college graduates (Crawford & Dalton, 2012). A variety of experiential learning activities within school-based agricultural education programs have shown a positive impact on students' soft skills development (Freeman, 2017). 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.

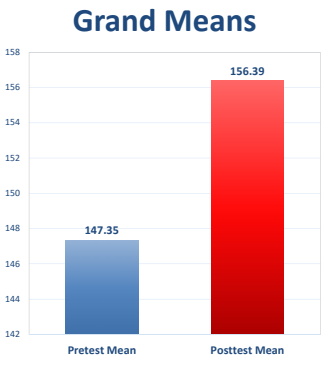
Purpose
The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of conference experiences in positively influencing high school agricultural education students' soft skills development. The following research objective and null hypothesis guided this study:
Determine if soft skills self-perceptions increased, decreased, or stayed the same when compared on a pretest and posttest of the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ-H).
Ho1: There is no significant difference in perceived level soft skill development after participating in a statewide FFA leadership conference.



Seven of the eight soft skills constructs exhibited significant increases across all participants. Achievement Motivation did show a significant increase ($p = 0.11$).

Results

Responses were received from 196 of the 1,280 conference participants (15.3%). Paired samples t-test 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 both conference groups had significant ($p < 0.01$) increases with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = .64; .79$).



Conclusions

- Participation in the virtual sophomore and junior-level FFA leadership conferences moderately benefited students' soft skills levels, which is consistent with current literature (Freeman, 2017).
- Conference coordinators are encouraged to review curricula to determine effective experiential learning activities to increase participant skills within 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 for the agricultural industry (Crawford & Dalton, 2012).
- It is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to evaluate conference participants as they move through the California FFA Leadership Continuum to measure the total impact of these experiential learning activities on agricultural education students' soft skills development.

References

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