

Examining students' perceptions of a

HIGH-IMPACT

agricultural learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic

McKenna Johnson, Dr. Lindsay Kennedy, Dr. Jason Headrick, Dr. Cindy Akers & Grace Vehige

INTRODUCTION/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- Agricultural leadership programs can increase participants' understanding of agriculture, improve their leadership and professional skills, and help them become high-functioning members of the workforce (Abbington-Cooper, 2005; Kuh, 2008).
- Experiential learning, high-impact learning, and adaptive leadership incorporate an active experience and reflection and can be used in leadership programs to prepare participants for leadership (Heifetz & Linsky, 2013; Kolb, 1984, Kuh, 1991).
- As organizations face increasingly complex problems, adaptive leadership and problem-solving utilizing multiple perspectives are needed (Nelson & Squires, 2017).
- The **Matador Institute of Leadership Engagement (MILE)** is a competitive, three-semester, undergraduate leadership and professional development program at Texas Tech University designed to give each 14-student cohort high-impact learning experiences.
- MILE seeks to develop participants' personal and professional skills while exposing them to key issues that affect local, state, and national agriculture and policy.
- MILE cohort I participants (2018-2019) increased their leadership and professional skills, gained a better understanding of themselves and others, increased their knowledge of the agricultural industry, broadened their professional network, and enhanced their concept of leadership (Smith et al., 2019).
- COVID-19 had a significant impact on the program's second cohort (2020-2021), resulting in fewer in-person experiences and more online meeting.
- MILE relies on field- and travel-based learning experiences, so an evaluation of students' perceived leadership and professional development during the altered instructional methods was needed to assess the program's effectiveness during the pandemic.

METHODS

- This case study replicated the efforts by Smith et al. (2019), which evaluated the program's first cohort, with the 14 students of MILE's cohort II in 2020 and 2021.
- Data collection included interviews and written reflections from MILE II members to learn about their perceptions of MILE and their experiences in the program.
- Qualitative data analysis of the interviews and reflections using the codebook from Smith et al. (2019) helped identify significant themes.
- NVivo 12.0 was used to analyze and code the interview data, and thematic analysis methods were used to develop themes from the coded data.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

- Four themes were identified: 1) networking, 2) exposure, 3) confidence/self-awareness, and 4) quality of content.

NETWORKING

- Engagement with industry professionals established and broadened their professional network
- Students valued peer-to-peer networking and learning from each other
- Students secured internships/other job opportunities through MILE

EXPOSURE

- Students valued exposure to diverse industries, sectors of ag, and relevant issues
- MILE helped students identify specific career interests
- "I have a much broader awareness of different areas of the industry. MILE has really broadened my horizons."

CONFIDENCE/ SELF-AWARENESS

- "I'm more confident in who I am as a person and as a leader."
- Observing different leadership styles among professionals led to increased confidence and self-awareness
- "I can use my leadership style to make a big impact."

QUALITY OF CONTENT

- Engaging with notable and quality industry and professional leaders was beneficial despite meeting virtually.
- "Although it was virtual, our meeting with the mayor of Amarillo was extremely impactful, because of the influence she had on me."

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

- MILE achieved its goal of developing personal/professional skills of members while exposing them to key issues, despite the shift to virtual meetings.
- The virtual modality was not viewed as a limiting factor in students' high-impact, real-world learning.
- Active learning positively affects students' critical thinking skills (Kilgo et al., 2015).
- Students learned problem-solving skills while engaging with adaptive leaders who were handling pandemic challenges (Heifetz & Linsky, 2013; Lowder, 2009).
- Changes to MILE due to COVID-19 forced students to grow as leaders.
- Students' exposure to real-time adaptive leadership will be beneficial as they enter the workforce and solve complex problems (Nelson & Squires, 2017).
- Leadership programs should focus on creating engaging learning opportunities with high-quality speakers who offer impactful information, regardless of the modality.
- Further evaluation of MILE should continue to identify its impact on graduates during their careers.
- The importance of adaptability should be incorporated into the MILE Program's curriculum.

CASNR
MILE



MILE is a professional and leadership development program in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas Tech University. Learn more at www.casnr.ttu.edu/MILE



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
College of Agricultural Sciences
& Natural Resources