

Student Perceptions of the Fifth Annual Greenhand Leadership Conference at Auburn University

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Introduction/need for research

The Greenhand Leadership Conference is a one-day event that first year agriculture/ FFA students across Alabama can participate in to prepare for earning their Greenhand Degree. To earn a Greenhand Degree, students must know the history, mission, creed, and emblem of FFA, as well as make plans for a Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) (Mozo, 2021). September 2021 marked the 5th Annual Greenhand Leadership Conference hosted in Alabama at Auburn University. This conference was made up of four separate sessions. These sessions were: FFA 1, which covered parliamentary procedure and the FFA manual; FFA 2, which covered the history, emblem, and colors of the National FFA Organization; FFA 3, which covered the FFA creed, mission, and motto; and SAE, which covered the meaning of SAE, what it consists of, and how to get started. Upon completion of all four sessions, students were asked to complete a twenty-question evaluation. The data collected will allow Auburn University to evaluate the Greenhand Leadership Conference based on student perceptions and feedback to reform and further develop this conference to have a greater impact on student learning.

Conceptual or theoretical framework

The establishment of FFA camps and events in 1928 provided a foundation for leadership development and social skills to flourish (Connors et al., 2010). These events provide students with endless opportunities for group and individual growth outside of their traditional classroom setting. Because of this, it is vital to evaluate these programs to ensure students are offered the most effective and engaging learning environment possible. Baker et al. (2012) stated, “learning is a concept that is built upon how experiences change people” (p. 7). Each session was developed using experiential learning approaches to foster a hands-on learning environment where students would have the opportunity to apply the knowledge gained during the sessions. Developing an atmosphere of excitement and engagement for learning creates experiences that shape students' leadership abilities and comprehension of the material being taught.

Methodology

Program evaluation data were collected using a twenty-question evaluation instrument. The instrument was comprised of two open-response questions and 18 closed-ended questions. The topics of the questions included participant demographics, self-reported opinion on knowledge gained during the conference, self-reported level of confidence to earn the Greenhand degree after attending the conference, and personal opinions on the conference. The questions were developed based on the session topics and the objectives of the conference. Evaluation data were collected during the final session of the Fall 2021 Greenhand Leadership Conference. Of the 73 students who completed the evaluation form, most students were in eighth or ninth grade (92%). Evaluation data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to be used for analysis. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to calculate descriptive statistics through frequencies and percentages. Open response answers about a participant's favorite or least favorite session during the conference were analyzed independently by four researchers using the inductive coding approach to ensure the common themes aligned (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Inductive coding is used to identify phrases and terms within the data to create codes for data analysis.

Results/findings

To collect data on knowledge gained because of the Greenhand Conference, participants were asked to rate the level to which they agree or disagree with the statement “As a result of the Greenhand Leadership Conference, I have learned a lot more than I already knew about...” for each topic covered during the conference using a five-point Likert-type scale: strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, and strongly agree. The ten topics included the FFA manual, parliamentary procedure, the meaning of the FFA emblem, FFA history, FFA colors, the meaning of SAE, different SAE types, FFA creed, FFA mission, and the FFA motto. The participants indicated that they learned the most about the meaning of SAE ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.95$), different SAE types ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.97$), and the FFA manual ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.96$). Participants indicated feeling prepared to earn their Greenhand degree because they participated in the conference ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.95$). Participants also indicated that they would recommend this conference to others ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.71$). As mentioned, the conference was broken up into four sessions FFA 1, FFA 2, FFA 3, and SAE. The overall favorite session from the conference was FFA 1 (34%), followed by SAE (29%), FFA 2 (15%), and FFA 3 (14%) respectively. The least favorite session from the conference was FFA 3 (32%), followed by FFA 1 (19%), FFA 2 (18%), “None” (16%), and SAE (11%).

Conclusions/recommendations

The Greenhand Leadership Conference met all objectives and proved to be a valuable asset for charting a path to future success for both those who attended, and those who hosted the event. When evaluating participant responses, an overwhelming majority ($n = 56$, 77%) indicated they felt better prepared to earn their greenhand degree due to the conference. Viewing each of the conference objectives, all showed a perceived increase knowledge by the participants. Taking a thematic analysis approach, we see that interactive and informative activities that utilized reward-based learning, trended as the most liked sessions from the leadership conference. While all sessions were chosen as the most favorite, FFA 1 which highlighted parliamentary procedure proved to be the overall favorite session from the day. FFA 3 (mission/motto/creed) was identified as the least liked session. We identified trends amongst sessions that contained elements of public speaking, confusing instructions, or tedious activities tended to be least liked. Reviewing the data relating to the least liked sessions, a surprising number of responses ($n = 12$, 16%) did not indicate a session or activity. Many of the reasons stated all sessions were fun and they learned something.

Implications from this study for future research indicate that workshops should be constructed from an assumption of no knowledge base of FFA. Many students commented that they did not know their requested information and were “put on the spot” in the FFA 3 workshop. This workshop can be modified to be more favorable and engaging for students (Nakamura & Lowenkron, 1964). Incentives such as candy proved beneficial in workshops and should continue to be used. Other incentives such as cash or gift cards may help in workshop engagement (Rousu et al., 2015). A questionnaire directly after each session may prove helpful as some students did not remember the details of specific sessions such as the names by lunchtime. The session with a recent high school graduate who students had rapport with was a student favorite (Posner, 2018). Further research on the characteristics of workshop presenters influencing effectiveness may be valuable.

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