

**A Delphi Investigation to Determine Experiential Learning Activities Utilized for Soft Skill
Development at Agriculture Community Colleges Across California**

Jocelyne Juarez, California State University, Fresno
Sharon Freeman, California State University, Fresno
Steven Rocca, California State University, Fresno

Sharon Freeman
sfreeman@mail.fresnostate.edu

Introduction

Currently in the workforce, employees need to have a balance between soft skills and hard, technical skills (Ali & Mahmud, 2018). The work world has changed drastically over the years and employees today have less repetitive tasks, and there is a “far more need to work with and through people at every level of the organization” (Brungardt, 2011, p. 2). Working with people insinuates the need for soft skills. “Communication, interpersonal relationships, professionalism, teamwork, problem-solving/ critical-thinking, ethical behavior, flexibility, leadership, and diversity awareness/sensitivity,” are all immensely vital soft skills for individuals (Stewart, Wall, & Marciniac, n.d., pp. 276-277). Fortunately, it is known that soft skills can be developed. “A person can undergo a simple self-training or guided training to improve the lacking skill[s]” (Schulz, 2008, p. 150). The purpose of this study was to determine which experiential learning activities are most commonly occurring at agricultural community colleges that assist in the development of soft skills. This information is needed for the implementation of the Agricultural Career Readiness Skills Certificate Pathway for 21st Century (ACRS21) at the community college level.

Theoretical Framework

Development of soft skills ties back into the experiential learning theory; “skills are developed by learning from experience” (Baker, Robinson, & Kolb, 2012, p. 4). Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study, which includes four stages, 1) concrete experiences, 2) reflection and observations, 3) abstract conceptualizations, and 4) active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

Methodology

A three-phased Delphi study was utilized in this research. An initial email was sent out on November 9, 2021 to a representative from each of the California community colleges that have agricultural programs on their campuses. From the initial email, which included the open-ended question, “What experiential learning activities are offered at your community college?”, six community college representatives responded with a total of 35 experiential activities listed. On February 23, 2022, each participant from the initial question was asked to indicate yes or no to each of the 35 experiential learning activities according to their community college campuses. These results were then analyzed to determine a more precise list of experiential learning activities. A minimum of 83% of the respondents must have indicated “Yes” for that activity to be considered in the last round of questioning. There were 24 experiential learning activities that had a minimum of an 83% affirmative response. The final question, sent out on April 4, 2022, asked the respondents to select only their top ten activities in which they believe developed the most soft skills and then asked the respondents to rank the activities from what they believe to be the most beneficial to the least beneficial.

Results/Findings

Individual and overall rankings for the top ten experiential learning activities are shown in Table 1. Activities are listed in descending order beginning with the top ranked activity, which was industry-based internships.

Table 1. *Top Ten Ranking of Experiential Learning Activities Utilized at Community Colleges*

Top 10 Activities	Ranking 1	Ranking 2	Ranking 3	Ranking 4	Ranking 5	Overall Ranking
Internships	10	5	9	9	10	43
Ag Ambassadors	9	4	5	5	7	30
Ind. Tours/Field Trips	8	10	4	4		26
Networking Events	6	6	1	10		23
Working at Units	7		10	2	3	22
CAL Conference	2	3		8	6	19
Judging Competition	5		3		9	17
Guest Speakers	4	9		3		16
CAL Competition		1		6	8	15
State Ag Amb. Conf.				7	5	12

Note. Reverse scoring was used when ranking (Ex. ranking of 1 = 10 points).

Conclusion

The top ten identified activities will be incorporated into the ACRS21 Community College Certificate, providing students with increased opportunities for work based learning and soft skills development. This research further demonstrates the essential nature of experiential learning activities such as internships, student ambassador programs and industry related tours and networking opportunities, which were reported to be the most utilized learning activities in the development of community college students' soft skills. Future research efforts should be focused on examining these activities to measure the effect they may have on the soft skills development of community college students.

References

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