Development of Soft Skills Curriculum for High School Students Participating in the Agricultural Career Readiness Skills for the 21st Century Certificate Pathway

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Introduction

The overarching goal of the Agricultural Career Readiness Certificate Pathway of the 21st Century (ACRS21) curriculum is to improve upon and retain students' employability skills through a sequence of secondary soft skills and career readiness curriculum. The ACRS21 Soft Skills Curriculum is based on experiential learning activities aligned with Career Technical Education Standards. ACRS21 allows students to meet the requirements for an ACRS21 Completer Certificate that recognizes their achievement of soft skills and career readiness standards. The ACRS21 curriculum specifically aids the instructors in implementing lessons that support the ACRS21 pathway. Previous research has demonstrated the need for soft skills to be taught at the high school level in order to prepare students for their future careers (National Research Council 2009, 2012, 2016). It is the goal of this project and the researchers to provide soft skills curriculum that will enhance the students' improvement of soft skills and career readiness practices.

How it Works

Through collaboration with the ACRS21 leadership team, two Agriculture Education graduate students created the ACRS21 Soft Skills Curriculum, which consists of nine units of instruction. These units of instruction focus on student's improvement in time management, social competence, intellectual flexibility, task leadership, emotional control, achievement motivation, active initiative, and self-confidence, which align with the constructs of the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire-H (LEQ-H) (Kechagias, 2011). Prior to creating each lesson, the curriculum outline was formulated using preselected CTE Career Readiness Standards and the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway requirements. The curriculum outline and units of instruction were created over the course of 6 months. Twenty-seven lessons were designed to be taught in a 30-minute time period. Each module contains three lessons that focus on improving the stated career readiness soft skills. The lessons were specifically constructed to maintain students' interaction and engagement. Shared Google Drive folders were created to make lesson plans easily accessible by teachers. In addition, instructional materials will be posted on the Agriculture Experience Tracker (AET) website. After the 27 lessons were completed, each were reviewed and edited by two additional educators. Nine of these lessons were selected to be independently taught in a high school agricultural classroom. A consent form, assent form, pre-test, post-test, and teacher's script are available online in AET. Teachers will be able to evaluate students' soft skills based on their AET entries and make student performance available to their administrators, advisory committee members, and other stakeholders. Assessment of soft skills is included in the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway and AET.

Results to Date/Implications

The ACRS21 Soft Skills Curriculum will positively impact the learning outcomes for students who will be seeking employment in the agriculture industry. This curriculum will be made accessible on the AET website and available to 7,394 FFA chapters in 50 states and over

596,000 students. The curriculum material will directly benefit the existing 713 agricultural high school programs within 41 states who have already adopted the ACRS21 certificate pathway. The curriculum guides students' development of soft skills through group collaboration, preparation for thoughtful responses, promotion of civil discussions, decision-making, and understanding diverse perspectives. The instructional material provides students with integrated visual information in the form of online interactive websites. The ACRS21 curriculum developers designed the curriculum to be easily implemented into all agricultural related courses, FFA meetings, and workshops by any instructor.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Plans for next year include the evaluation of high school agriculture students on their soft skills development after receiving instruction of nine lessons selected from the ACRS21 curriculum. The target audience for this study will include students participating in the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway throughout California. A minimum of three teachers from each participating school will receive ACRS21 curriculum training prior to initiating the project. All curriculum related documents developed for this project will be shared through AET and teachers will have full access to lesson plans and related resources. Participating students will be evaluated utilizing a pre/post survey using the LEQ-H instrument. After opening an ACRS21 application in AET, students will have access to the LEQ-H pre and post assessments. The LEQ-H survey has been utilized in 20 different countries to measure soft skills development (Kechagias, 2011). During the fall of 2023, identified agriculture teachers will provide the instruction for the nine soft skills lessons. Following instruction, researchers will evaluate student scores, as recorded in AET, to determine if a significant difference occurred in the development of soft skills. The research team will conduct an overall analysis of student performance utilizing paired sample t-tests. Agricultural instructors are encouraged to include the ACRS21 Soft Skills Curriculum in their freshman courses and introduce the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway early in order to promote certificate completers. Having access to the curriculum and the certificate pathway will provide career readiness skills for students who will be securing future careers in the agriculture industry.

Costs/Resources Needed

The ACRS21 Curriculum Project was funded by a USDA/HSI Education Grant. The grant covered the expenses for two graduate students' salaries and the use of technology, totaling $51,000. The collaboration with AET has made it possible for all curriculum resources to be housed on the AET website at https://theaet.com/ACRS21. Teachers and students will have access the curriculum by logging on to the AET, selecting "AET in the Classroom", and opening the ACRS21 resource page. There are no costs associated with the use of this nationwide curriculum for high school agriculture teachers or their students.

References

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