

**An Evaluation of Soft Skills Development of Agricultural Ambassadors'
Participating in the ACRS21 Program**

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Introduction

Traditionally, higher education curriculum has primarily focused on technical skills and competencies, however more recently, educators have become aware of the essential need to prepare students with the necessary soft skills to succeed in society. Educators need to emphasize the incorporation of soft skills into the development of their students and how they can incorporate training of soft skills into hard skills (Schulz, 2018). Research has found that students' comfortability with their soft skills increased through just one year of on-campus club involvement (Kovarik & Warren, 2020). Today's job market, job interviews, collaboration in a work environment, presentations in the workplace, and social competence are valid explanations for the need for soft skills to be acquired (Schulz, 2008). Because 21st-century competencies, also known as soft skills, are important for positive outcomes within the workplace, employers are urging future employees to possess these sets of skills before entering the workforce (National Research Council, 2012). Stewart et al. (2016) determined that most college students believed that their soft skills were meeting expectations, and the soft skills that students felt most confident in were the soft skills that employers feel students lack. Although a great deal of research has been conducted on soft skills development, there is a need for research regarding the development of soft skills by students participating in the Agricultural Ambassador Program at the California State University, Fresno. This research study sought to determine the development of soft skills by Ambassadors participating in a semester-long course, which included soft skills lessons aligned to the Agricultural Career Readiness Skills Certificate Pathway for the 21st Century (ACRS21). The researcher created the necessary lesson plans, provided instruction of the lessons, and analyzed data to determine if there was a significant difference in soft skills development during the Ambassador course.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Kolb's Experiential Learning Model as its theoretical basis. Kolb's model demonstrates that learning is a cyclical process in which students engage in a new experience, reflect on their observations, create concepts based upon these observations, and then apply these theories (Kolb, 2014). Students participating in the Ambassador's course were provided with experiential learning activities aligned to the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway, which were cross-referenced to the National Career Technical Education Standard for Career Readiness Practices.

Methodology

This research utilized a convenience sample that consisted of 26 students participating in the college's Ambassador course. During the course, nine lessons were taught that focused on the experiential learning areas of the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway. Ambassadors were asked to complete a pre and post-assessment called the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ-H) when they entered the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway and when they completed the course. The LEQ-H was originally created to evaluate soft skills development of experiential learning activities for Outward Bound students (Neill et al., 2003) and has since been used in over 20 countries to measure soft skills development in students. The pre and post-assessments were made available on the Agricultural Experience Tracker system website. The LEQ-H consists of 24 Likert-type items with three items representing each sub construct. Neil et al. (2003) established the instruments reliability with Cronbach Alpha coefficients ranging from .70 to .86 across the eight

sub constructs. The instrument asks participants to indicate if a statement on the assessment was “not like me” (1) to “like me” (8). Eight soft skill development lessons were administered to participants. A paired sample t-test with a 95% confidence interval was used to determine if a significant difference occurred between the grand mean scores of the pre and post assessments. An additional paired sample t-test with a 95% confidence interval was performed to determine if significant differences existed across each of the eight sub constructs of soft skills.

Results

The paired sample t-test revealed a significant ($p = .001$) increase in the overall perceived soft skills level by participants. The overall mean score for the pre-assessment was $M = 48.92$ and the overall mean score for the post assessment was $M = 54.53$. These grand means demonstrate that there was a positive change in the overall mean scores between the pre and post-assessments. The paired sample t-test revealed that seven of the eight soft skills constructs exhibited significant increases across all participants. All eight soft skill areas experienced increased means. The soft skill sub construct, time management, had a significant ($p = .001$) increase from a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 5.38$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 6.27$. Social competence had a significant ($p = .003$) from a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 5.88$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 6.61$. Achievement motivation had a significant ($p = .024$) increase from a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 7.19$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 7.58$. Intellectual flexibility had a significant ($p = .008$) increase from a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 6.23$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 6.85$. Task leadership had a significant ($p = .001$) increase from a pre-assessment score of $M = 5.96$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 6.73$. Emotional control had a significant ($p = .001$) increase from a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 5.27$ to a post-assessment score of $M = 6.38$. The active initiative area had a significant ($p = .001$) increase from a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 6.27$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 7.04$. Self-confidence had a pre-assessment mean score of $M = 6.7308$ to a post-assessment mean score of $M = 7.08$.

Conclusion

Results indicate that participants' soft skills levels significantly increased from the overall pre and post-assessment mean scores. The analysis of the eight soft skill sub constructs indicates that there was a significant increase in time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, task leadership, emotional control, and active initiative. Therefore, participation in the Agriculture Ambassadors course with the implementation of the ACRS21 curriculum appears to have positively benefited students' soft skill levels. Based on the findings and conclusions, the researchers have made the following recommendation: 1) encourage other universities and colleges to consider implementing the ACRS21 program and curricula into their institutions to better prepare students for the workplace, and 2) a longitudinal study is needed to evaluate Agricultural Ambassadors' collegiate years to determine if soft skill development is occurring from the time participants enter an institution to graduation.

References

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