

# An Evaluation of Soft Skills Development of JCAST Ambassadors' Participating in the ACRS21 Program

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if soft skill development occurred for JCAST Ambassadors participating in the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway during the Fall 2022 Semester. Students completed a soft skills assessment at the beginning of the semester, then nine soft skill development lessons were presented, followed by a post-test assessment.

Describe the demographics of JCAST Ambassadors that include grade level, gender, years in school, and race/ethnicity.

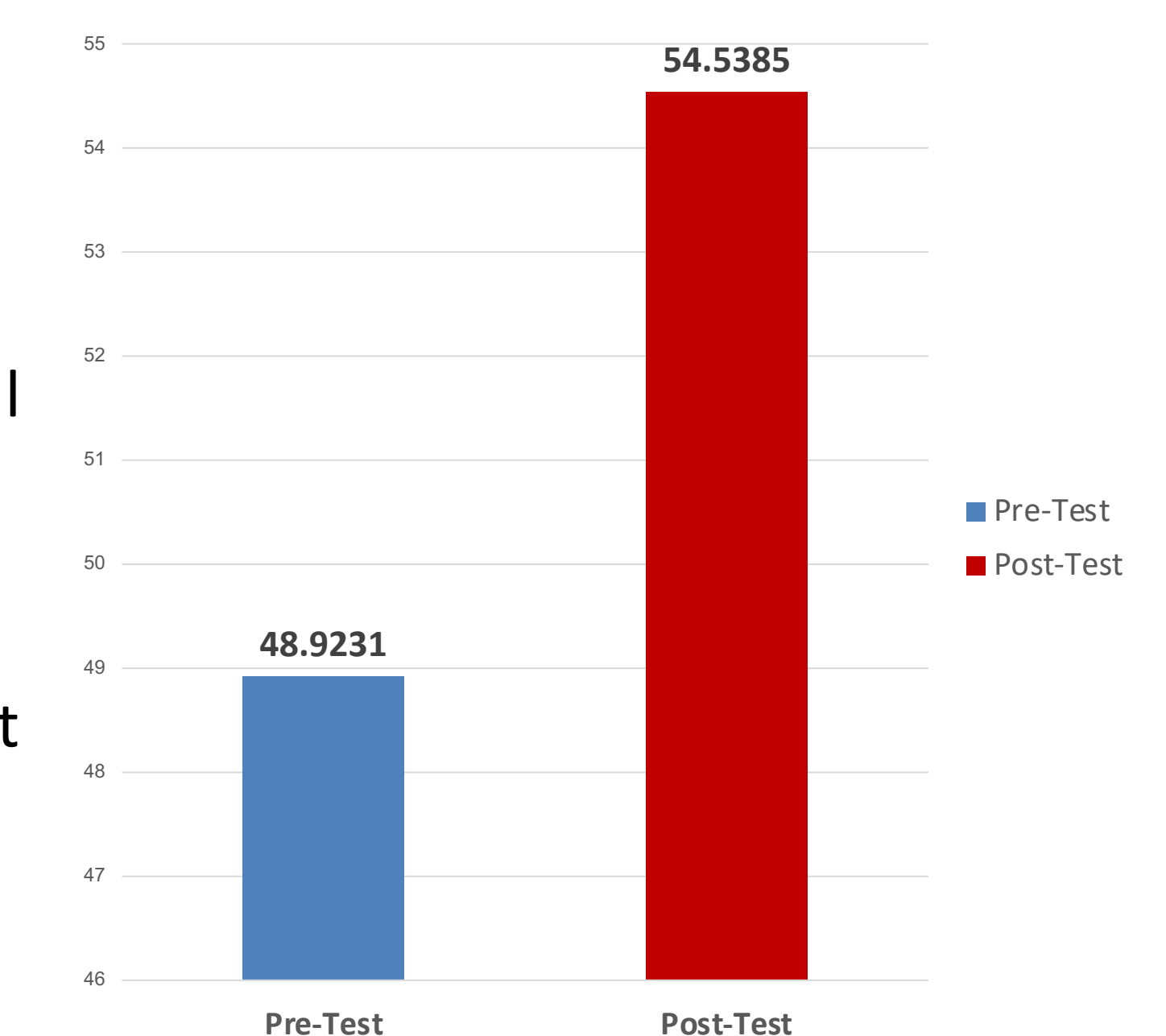
## Introduction

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 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, and social competence are valid explanations for the need for soft skills to be acquired (Schulz, 2018). Although a great deal of research has been conducted on soft skill development, there is a need for research regarding the development of soft skills by students participating in the Agriculture Ambassador Program.

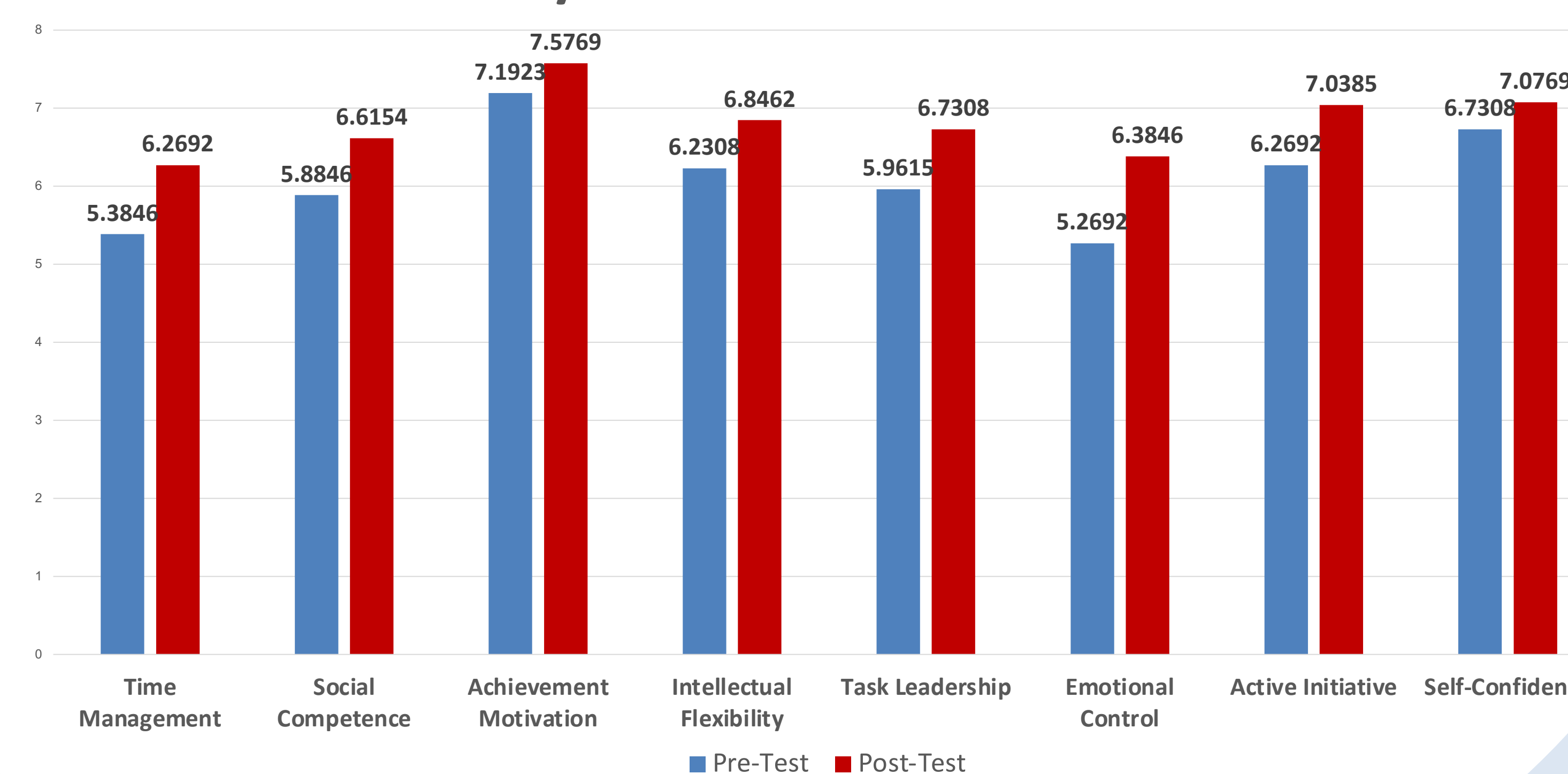
## Results

Responses were received from 26 of the 55 Agricultural Ambassadors (47.27%). Paired samples t-test revealed a significant ( $p = .001$ ) increase in the overall perceived soft skills level by participants. The overall mean score for the pre-test survey was 48.9231 and the mean score for the post-test survey 54.5385. This means that there was a positive change in the overall mean scores between the pre and post-test surveys.

### Grand Means



## Pre-test/Post-test Soft Skills Levels



Seven of the eight soft skills constructs exhibited significant increases across all participants, with all eight areas experiencing increased means.

Conclusions



Results indicate that participants soft skill level significantly increased from pre-test (M=48.9) to post-test (M=54.3) with the implementation of the ACRS21 program and nine soft skill lessons.



Participation in Agriculture Ambassadors course with the implementation of the ACRS21 benefited students' soft skills levels, which is consistent with current literature (Freeman, 2017).



Other universities and colleges are encouraged to consider implementing the ACRS21 program and curricula into their institutions' to better prepare students for the work place.



A longitudinal study is recommended to evaluate Ag Ambassadors collegiate years and determine soft skill development from the time they enter an institution to graduation.

## Theoretical Framework

This study used Kolb's Experimental 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 experimental learning activities aligned to the ACRS21 Certificate Pathway, which were cross-referenced to the AFNR Career Technical Education Standard for Career Readiness Practices.

## Methods

- This quasi-experimental study evaluated 26 Jordan College Agricultural Ambassadors enrolled in the Agricultural Ambassador course during the Fall of 2022.
- The pretest and posttest were made available via an online survey tool in the AET record book. The Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ-H) captured students' self-perceptions of their soft skills as it measures confidence in eight soft skill categories.
- Nine soft skill development lessons were administered to participants before the post-test took place.
- The instrument consists of 24 Likert-type items; participants indicate if the statement is "not like me" (1) to "like me" (8).
- Demographic data were gathered including gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level.
- Paired samples t-tests with a 95% confidence interval were used to determine if a significant difference between the grand mean scores on the LEQ-H between the pretest and posttest.
- Additional analyses were performed to determine if significant differences existed across each of the eight categories.

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