

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AMBASSADORS

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INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

- From an employer standpoint, undergraduate and graduate students lack “soft skills” needed on the job (Bronson, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Schneider, 2015)
- Greater attention needed on interpersonal communication in the college curriculum (Morgan, Fuhrman, & Marsh, 2014; Thomas, 2010)



INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

- Becoming a College Ambassador can reinforce students' ...
 - personal development;
 - leadership skills;
 - self-confidence; and
 - communication skills (Arnold, 2012)



RATIONALE

- Building communication skills in college students is important for future career success
- However, little is known about *where* and *how* college students acquire key communication skills



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- Examine factors which influenced College of Agriculture Ambassadors in their attainment of communication skills
 - Establish recommendations for enhancing student communication skills through course curricula



DATA COLLECTION

- Fifteen College of Agriculture Ambassadors contacted
- Two focus groups conducted
 - Focus Group 1- 1st year Ambassadors ($n = 7$)
 - Focus Group 2- 2nd year Ambassadors ($n = 6$)



DATA ANALYSIS

- Focus groups audio recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Domain analysis used to summarize data and identify reoccurring, emerging themes
- Domains reviewed by lead author, another researcher, and peers to ensure consistency in interpretation
- Recommendations made based on transferability of findings to other college programs

FINDINGS: DOMAINS

- Similar findings across first and second year Ambassadors
- Five overarching domains emerged:
 - Ambassador experiences (interacting)
 - Recommendations for other students
 - Influences on participation as an Ambassador
 - Past communication experiences (observing)
 - Personal preparation for speaking



FINDINGS: AMBASSADOR EXPERIENCES (INTERACTING)

“We are able to interact with other people in job settings and really important people that we may not have had the opportunity to learn how to talk to...and that’s incredibly valuable for me...”



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER STUDENTS

“I would say growing up in 4-H, you can do different tracks of things and leadership is one of the principles that they try to instill in you...I think that’s something that should be recreated for everyone...because being able to serve as a leader in any situation gives you the ability to effectively communicate with others and also learn how to push yourself...”



FINDINGS: INFLUENCES ON PARTICIPATION AS AN AMBASSADOR

“The networking opportunities that we have are awesome and we get to tell our story to different students and give them advice that we wish we had as freshmen or high school seniors making decisions, so we really get to help those students that come on tours or that just need questions answered at different events we go to.”



FINDINGS: PAST COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES (OBSERVING)

“I think that one of the best ways that I learn to speak well is to hear speakers that are good, like good examples, especially when they come to class and you get to ask questions afterwards. They know and they’ve been practicing for a long time and they have tricks that I wouldn’t know, so just observing them and listening to them, you pick up a few things.”



FINDINGS: PERSONAL PREPARATION FOR SPEAKING

“...I tend to speak very fast when I’m in front of friends and people that I’m comfortable with, so the thing I try to do is slow down and to enunciate my words so that people will understand me better. And also, by slowing down it helps me, if I have nerves, it helps to eliminate my nerves and everything...”



CONCLUSIONS

- Regardless of tenure as an Ambassador, communication skills were influenced by:
 - Flexible interactions with university and industry professionals outside of the classroom
 - Assignments where students are asked to lead an activity
 - Encouragement to tell “their story” to others with personality and creativity
 - Observing exemplary (and not so exemplary) speakers/teachers
 - Opportunities to practice speaking



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider offering assignments that...
 - Involve student participation in events with professionals (e.g., poster sessions, lunch with industry leaders, speaker series)
 - Promote student ownership and choice (e.g., complete any two of the following four activities)
 - Actually make it comfortable for students to make communication mistakes and reflect on those errors (e.g., watch themselves on video)

