



The Impact of a University Connections Course on Freshman Students in the School of Agriculture and Human Ecology

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Introduction

During their freshman year of college, students are required to take a connections course linking them to the university as a way to strengthen student involvement, develop an advancement in study skills, and learn more about themselves as well as their goals throughout their college career. Upon completion of the course, School of Agriculture and Human Ecology students were asked to evaluate their perceived level of importance as well as competence for three constructs: communication, leadership, and critical thinking using an instrument that had been pilot tested to determine reliability. The purpose of this study was to identify how students feel their imperative level of importance correlates to their attained level of competence. The majority of employers felt that recent college graduates are not prepared for the workforce in areas such as critical thinking skills, written and oral communication skills, and working with others in teams (AACU, 2015; Brooks et al., 2008; Crawford et al., 2011).

Methods

The instrument used to gather data for the communication, leadership, and critical thinking constructs was given to students during their last class period through a numerical ranking survey style. Students were asked to rank their perception based on a 1-5 scale: 1 (not important/not competent), 2 (of little importance/of little competence), 3 (somewhat important/somewhat competent), 4 (important/competent), and 5 (very important/very competent). Reliability coefficients range from .73 - .975.

Results

Students Perceived Level of Communication Importance

Communication Importance	Number of Students	% Important-Very Important
<i>I actively listen</i>	63	96.82%
<i>I can show empathy when talking to others</i>	62	90.32%
<i>I can explain a situation to others</i>	64	89.06%
<i>I can explain myself in writing</i>	64	85.94%
<i>I cannot pick up on people's nonverbal communication</i>	63	65.08%

Note. 1=not important, 2=of little importance, 3= somewhat important, 4=important, 5=very important.

Students Perceived Level of Communication Competence

Communication Competence	Number of Students	% Competent-Very Competent
<i>I actively listen</i>	63	84.13%
<i>I can show empathy when talking to others</i>	63	77.78%
<i>I can explain a situation to others</i>	64	73.44%
<i>I can use summary statements to clarify</i>	64	65.62%
<i>I cannot pick up on people's nonverbal communication</i>	64	40.62%

Note. 1=not competent, 2=of little competence, 3= somewhat competent, 4=competent, 5=very competent.

Students Perceived Level of Leadership Importance

Leadership Importance	Number of Students	% Important-Very Important
<i>I feel responsible for my actions</i>	64	96.88%
<i>I can cooperate in a group</i>	64	93.75%
<i>I can follow directions</i>	64	93.75%
<i>I feel responsible for my decisions</i>	64	92.19%
<i>I am unsure of my abilities</i>	61	67.21%

Note. 1=not important, 2=of little importance, 3= somewhat important, 4=important, 5=very important.

Students Perceived Level of Leadership Competence

Leadership Competence	Number of Students	% Competent-Very Competent
<i>I feel responsible for my decisions</i>	65	92.31%
<i>I can work in a group</i>	65	90.77%
<i>I can cooperate in a group</i>	65	89.23%
<i>I can use information in making a decision</i>	65	89.23%
<i>I am unsure of my abilities</i>	63	36.51%

Note. 1=not competent, 2=of little competence, 3= somewhat competent, 4=competent, 5=very competent.

Students Perceived Level of Critical Thinking Importance

Critical Thinking Importance	Number of Students	% Important-Very Important
<i>I strive to be well informed</i>	63	96.83%
<i>I am a good problem solver</i>	64	93.75%
<i>I listen carefully to the opinions of others even when they disagree with me</i>	64	93.75%
<i>I ask lots of questions in a learning environment</i>	64	90.62%
<i>I am likely to change my opinion when I am given new information that conflicts with my current opinion</i>	64	70.31%

Note. 1=not important, 2=of little importance, 3= somewhat important, 4=important, 5=very important.

Students Perceived Level of Critical Thinking Competence

Critical Thinking Competence	Number of Students	% Competent-Very Competent
<i>I strive to be well informed</i>	64	89.06%
<i>I am a good problem solver</i>	65	86.15%
<i>I keep on working on things until I get them right</i>	64	84.38%
<i>I believe that most problems have more than one solution</i>	63	82.54%
<i>I am likely to change my opinion when I am given new information that conflicts with my current opinion</i>	64	45.31%

Note. 1=not competent, 2=of little competence, 3= somewhat competent, 4=competent, 5=very competent.

Discussion

In the communication construct students felt that their top perceived level of importance was "*I actively listen*" (96.82%) and their top perceived level of competence was also "*I actively listen*" (84.13%). Their lowest perceived level of competence was "*I cannot pick up on people's non-verbal communication*" (40.62%).

In the leadership construct, students felt that their top perceived level of importance was "*I feel responsible for my actions*" (96.88%) and their top perceived level of competence was "*I feel responsible for my decisions*" (92.31%). Their lowest perceived level of competence was "*I am unsure of my abilities*" (36.51%).

In the critical thinking construct, students felt that their top perceived level of importance (96.83%) and competence (89.06%) was "*I strive to be well informed*". The students' lowest perceived level of competence was "*I am likely to change my opinion when I am given new information that conflicts with my current opinion*" (45.31%).

Conclusion/Recommendation

Results indicate that this group of college freshmen feel very responsible for their actions and strive to be well informed. They also perceive that they are good listeners but aren't very competent in picking up on one's non-verbal communication. Lastly, this group of students feel that they are competent to very competent at working in groups and solving problems.

The items students feel most competent in performing aren't in line with previous research. Brooks et al., (2008) and Crawford et al., (2011) discovered that industry leaders felt that new hires lacked in their ability to work effectively in teams, solve problems, and be critical thinkers. This disparity may be due in part to this current generation of young college students who self-reported their levels of competence for each item. It may also be the simple fact that industry leaders are more critical when evaluating young employees.

It must be noted that this group of freshmen strive to be well informed but only 45.31% felt competent or very competent for the following statement: "*I am likely to change my opinion when I am given new information that conflicts with my current opinion*". This characteristic is very important if one wishes to be an effective critical thinker. With that said, how can colleges and universities effectively assist students in honing and polishing their communication, leadership and critical thinking skills so they become more productive and compassionate leaders? One option is to offer courses in leadership, critical thinking and require students to immerse themselves in different cultures so as to gain a greater appreciation for differing opinions.

References

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