

Poster Proposal

For

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***The Impact of Communications Skills Development on College  
Students' Communication Apprehension***

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## **Introduction**

Employers consistently cite effective oral communication skills among the top criteria for success of new hires, but often find candidates unprepared in these skills. In addition, recent research indicates that poor oral communication skills and communication apprehension (CA) are linked to lower academic performance and higher college dropout rates as compared to other students. The National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication includes a research priority to “Recruit and prepare students for the future workforce in the agricultural and life sciences” (Osborne, 2007, p. 16). An additional research priority focuses on “How well do program graduates perform in the workplace?” (p.18). In our increasingly competitive world, it is critical college graduates enter the work environment with the appropriate skills to not only survive but also grow their career. Enhancing students' employability is vital to the knowledge driven economy of the United States (Hawkrigde, 2005). The purpose of this study was to determine if college student participation in skills based public speaking class will decrease their communication apprehension (CA) and thereby increase their opportunities for employability and career success.

## **Conceptual or Theoretical Framework**

College graduates are not properly prepared for success when entering the work force (Conference Board, 2006). No longer are memorization and content specific knowledge the skills students will need to compete. Skills including problem solving, communication, life-long learning and critical thinking are now the basic requirements to be able to compete and be successful (Paranto & Kelkar, 1999). To be successful in the work environment employers desire strong communications and interpersonal skills. (Fallows & Weller, 2000). In his ground breaking work in 1977, James McCroskey clearly defined CA as the fear or anxiety, either real or perceived, to communicate orally with others. CA is common throughout all professions and peoples of America with over 40% of the adult population reporting a fear of public speaking (Lewis-Holmes, 1997). This fear negatively impacts not only the speaker, but also the audience as they note the apprehension in the speaker resulting in an ineffective presentation; ‘if communications sources report themselves as apprehensive the research generally finds negative outcomes to occur’ (Cole & McCroskey, 2003, p. 102).

## **Methodology**

Undergraduates at four large land grant universities participated in a required skills based class specifically designed to reduce students' CA while improving presentation and public speaking skills. Students' CA levels were measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). This assessment was developed by James McCroskey and has a high reliability of .94 with a mean score of 65.6 and a standard deviation of 15.7. Assessment scores range on a scale of 24 to 120 with a score of 24 indicating very low CA levels and a score of 120 indicating an individual with extremely high CA (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989). In this research pre-test (in the first two weeks of the term) and post-test (in the last two

AAAE Poster Proposal: *The Impact of Communications Skills Development on College Students' Communication Apprehension*

weeks of the term) assessments were given to students (n=294) to measure their improvements in CA.

### Results/Findings

Over the semester, statistically significant declines were observed in student CA as measured by the PRCA-24. At a 95% confidence interval, pretest mean scores decreased from 66.31 to 56.95 with a paired sample t test ( $t = 13.862$ ,  $df = 293$ ) indicating a significant decrease in student CA.

Descriptive Statistics			
		Pretest	Posttest
N	Valid	294	294
	Missing	0	0
	Mean	66.31	56.95
	Std. Deviation	15.848	15.500
	Range	88	82
	Minimum	32	24
	Maximum	120	106

### Conclusions

The findings of this study support continuation of the communications course for undergraduate students of agriculture. The skills based oral communications class reduces student CA levels.

### Implications/Recommendations

CA reduction strategies have broad applications and benefits to courses without a communication focus. The researchers recommend that all college instructors incorporate CA reduction strategies into student assignments and class routines. The result is likely to be a more confident and better prepared graduate entering the workforce.

### References

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AAAE Poster Proposal: ***The Impact of Communications Skills Development on College Students' Communication Apprehension***

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