

# Student Organization Sponsored Dog Training Classes Provide Experiential Learning Opportunity for Students and Community Participants

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## Abstract

The goal of this project was to determine the effectiveness of dog training classes provided by a student organization offered to members of the community at large. An eight-week Canine Good Citizen (CGC) class for dogs taking a CGC test upon completion of the class was offered. Using exit surveys, community participants and students ranked a series of items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert-type scale. Students ( $n = 9$ ) indicated completion of the course provided a better understanding of dog training (mean = 4.7). Students exhibited an improvement in career skills such as communication and organization. Students showed assisting with the course allowed them to apply class content (mean = 4.0) and a desire for more hands on opportunities (mean = 4.6). The community dog handlers ( $n = 29$ ) indicated that they felt the class improved their dog's behavior (mean = 4.7), the university was providing a valuable service by offering the class (mean = 4.6) and that they enjoyed interacting with the students (mean = 4.2). Providing community dog training classes improved student learning and improved community awareness and support of the university's companion animal program.

**Key words:** dog, training, experiential learning

## Introduction

It is estimated that 62% of the U.S. population owns a companion animal (APPA, 2011). With pet owners increasing demand for higher quality care and products and services for their companion animals, there has been

an increase in demand for highly trained and educated personnel to work in these fields. Undergraduate programs have begun to offer companion animal course work and degree options to meet these needs. However, often these programs have limited or no hands on experiences working directly with companion animals and their owners.

Approximately one-third of freshman in Animal Science at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln indicated an interest in working with companion animals as a career. Their career interests were varied and were in areas such as veterinary medicine, behavior, the pet product industry and animal sheltering. However, many undergraduate students have had limited understanding of dog training principles beyond working with their household pets. Behavior problems are a key concern for companion animal professionals as they are among the leading causes of dogs being relinquished to shelters (Patronek et al., 1996). However, only 24% of dog owners attend a dog training class (Coren, 1999). By partnering with a professional dog trainer, undergraduate students may be able to have a better understanding of the importance of dog training and the proper methods of training to be employed.

This project was a pilot program to determine the impacts on undergraduate students with a companion animal interest on their understanding of dog behavior and their overall college experience. Due to scheduling of the dog training class, it was decided to pilot it as an opportunity for experiential learning through the student organization rather than a class. The impacts on students

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who assisted with the training class as well as the community members who enrolled in the dog training course were evaluated.

### Materials And Methods

#### Training Classes Offered

Students for Education in Exotic and Companion Animals (SEECA) is a recognized student organization on the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) campus. Student members of the organization share a common interest in companion animals such as dogs, cats, small mammals and exotic animals such as zoo animals. The majority of members are in majors in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources such as Animal Science, Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences and Fisheries and Wildlife.

Student members contracted Prairie Skies, Inc. to provide a dog training class to members of the University population and general public. Prairie Skies, Inc. is a dog training business that provided the dog trainer who led the dog training course and provided the standard course methodology. Students provided pre-class preparation (including advertising, registering class members, facility set up and communicating with attendees) and assisted the trainer in working with handlers during the class. The dog training classes were held on UNL's East Campus in the Animal Science Complex Commons Area or a laboratory practicum classroom. Training classes were offered over four semesters from fall 2009 to spring 2011. During three of the semesters, an eight-week course was offered that targeted those who wanted to complete their Canine Good Citizen (CGC) exam. During the spring 2010 semester, two four-week courses were offered back to back. Those handler and dog pairs who completed both classes were eligible to take the CGC exam, but owners were not required to take both four-week sessions. The course offered was similar to ones offered through other dog training facilities as well as at some shelters or humane societies.

The CGC exam is a standardized test offered through the American Kennel Club (AKC) to evaluate the ability of a dog to apply its training and coexist with people successfully. Dogs and handlers are asked to complete ten exercises to pass the exam. These include accepting a friendly stranger, loose leash walking, coming when called, supervised separation for handler and reaction to another dog (AKC, 2011). The CGC is an initial step in training that seeks to help ensure the dog has good practical training for around the home and community (AKC, 2011). The CGC certification is often required for dogs and handlers who are interested in animal assisted activities such as visiting nursing homes or hospital patients. An independent AKC certified CGC

tester administered the exam to any class participants who wanted to take the exam on an evening following the course completion.

Prior to each course session, university students were responsible for developing class advertising, talking to potential class participants and completing necessary registration paperwork. Dog handlers who participated in the training classes were contacted through advertisements placed on campus or sent out through Prairie Skies e-mail contact list. Handlers who were affiliated (faculty, staff, or student) with the university were given a discount on the training class fee.

Once the courses started, students assisted with check in of class participants, observed the training class and assisted with the class as needed. Often students assisted with practice of parts of the CGC exam that required additional human handlers such as walking through a crowd or accepting a friendly stranger. Students observed the training courses and were able to ask questions of the trainer after each session of the class.

#### Survey Design

Two surveys were developed for this project. One was developed for undergraduate student members of SEECA who were assisting with the class. The other was developed for members of the public who enrolled in the dog training course with their dogs. Both surveys asked for initial demographic information. This included age, year in school and semester participated in for the college students and dog breed, age of dog and training class participated in for the community members.

Participants were then asked to respond to a variety of questions on a five point Likert-type scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Survey questions were categorized to ascertain the effects on student learning and career development as well as understanding of dog training principles for undergraduate students and perception of the university and dog training skills/dog behavior for the community members. Students and community members were provided the survey as a paper copy the last day of class or via e-mail after the class had ended. The survey procedures were approved by the University of Nebraska - Lincoln's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

#### Statistical Analysis

Data was analyzed using the mixed models procedure of SAS (Cary, NC). For the survey of student participants, the variable of class (upperclassmen vs. underclassman) was analyzed. No differences were noted in student survey responses regardless of class level so data for

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all students were combined. For the data on community participants, the variables of class session participated in and gender of participants were analyzed. In addition, a correlation analysis was run on the responses to the survey questions asked. No differences were noted between class sessions so all data was combined.

## Results And Discussion

Students were asked to complete the survey after the first time they assisted with the dog training course. Nine of the 14 (64%) students returned surveys after participation in the dog training course. The student organization that assisted with the dog training course averages thirty members each academic year. Of these nine students, all assisted with the dog training course in more than one semester. Reasons for not assisting with the dog training course were most frequently conflicts with other courses or work.

Students strongly indicated that assisting with the dog training classes helped them learn skills they could apply to their own dog ownership (mean = 4.9, SD = 0.33) and improved their understanding of dog training (mean = 4.7, SD = 1.00) (Table 1). If students participate in dog training classes when they obtain a dog in the future, it could result in more responsible dog ownership. Students were interested in taking a similar dog training course with their own dog in the future (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.73). However, only two students actually completed the course with their dogs. Students had a better appreciation of the human – animal bond (mean = 4.4, SD = 0.73).

Assisting with the dog training class added value to the students' education and professional development (Table 1). Students would like more hands-on experiences similar to this one in college (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.73) and felt it allowed them an opportunity to apply what they were learning in class (mean = 4.0, SD = 0.87). Many club members are Animal Science or Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Science majors and have taken companion animal courses offered at UNL. The dog training course provided a hands-on opportunity which is not always available with a companion animal science undergraduate program.

Students assisting with the dog training course indicated it allowed them to be better prepared for the future through improving life skills like communication (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.73) and organization (mean = 4.3, SD = 0.71). Students were required to answer owner questions related to the class, dog training and dog ownership in general. Students had to practice problem solving and critical thinking to answer the questions. After

class sessions, they would often talk to the instructor or club advisor and discuss how they could have handled a situation better or seek guidance in answering questions. Students were provided feedback on e-mail communications if they were involved in lining up class materials or information with the community members. They also learned more effective ways to communicate with dog owners such as writing clear e-mail responses to questions or providing detailed answers to questions about training class requirements. Kuh (1995) found that service learning resulted in personal leadership development particularly in the areas of planning, organizing, decision making and managing. Students indicated that they understood the importance of dog training in their future career (mean = 4.4, SD = 0.73), but they did not feel as strongly that helping with the dog training class would help prepare them for a future career (mean = 3.7, SD = 1.00). Because these students may be looking for a career working with companion animals and their owners, having a better appreciation for the importance of dog training may result in them recommending it to more dog owners. Participation in dog training will increase the likelihood of dogs staying in their current home and decrease the risk of injury or relinquishment to a shelter (Duxbury et al., 2003; Bennett and Rohlf, 2007). Students assisting with the course had an opportunity to work with dogs, dog owners and a professional trainer. Based on surveys of freshman animal science majors, over 50% of freshman animal science students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are considering attending veterinary medicine. This opportunity can provide experiences that students can utilize in their future careers. Students often have

*Table 1. Effects on student understanding of training procedures and undergraduate student learning and career development for students who assisted with a community dog training class. (N = 9)*

Item	Mean	SD
I have a better understanding of dog training after assisting with this dog training class.	4.7	1.00
I better appreciate the human-animal bond after helping with this class.	4.4	0.73
I would take a similar dog training class with my dog.	4.6	0.73
I learned skills I can apply to my own dog ownership.	4.9	0.33
I was able to apply what I learned in my university classes to the skills needed for assisting with the dog training class.	4.0	0.87
I would like more hands on experiences like this in college.	4.6	0.73
I can see the importance of dog training in my future career.	4.4	0.73
I feel this experience helped prepare me for a career.	3.7	1.00
I learned the importance of organizational skills when working with people.	4.3	0.71
I learned the importance of effective communication skills.	4.6	0.73
Assisting with this class, made me feel like I was providing an important community service.	4.0	1.12
I found it valuable to interact with members of the public and their dogs.	4.2	1.09
I would assist with a class like this again.	4.4	0.73

Ranked on a scale of 1 – 5: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

limited hands on experience with dog training outside of their own home prior to starting college and entering the work field. In order to improve the impact assisting with the class has on preparing the students for their future career, ways to get the students more involved in the course are being explored. Possible ideas include having the students provide short presentations on dog care or health to the class at the beginning of each session and having the students assist more directly with the dog training rather than just observing. Often after the students observed at the first series of classes, they may have been more likely to assist with future courses and would see a more directly link to career preparation.

In addition to learning life skills, students felt they were providing a valuable community service (mean = 4.0, SD = 1.12). Participation in community service linked with classroom instruction allows students to apply classroom concepts to new situations and be more aware of societal challenges (Markus et al., 1993). Students learning about the challenges of training dogs and working with dog owners may better shape how they react to similar situations in their future careers. Students who volunteer or participate in community service projects during college are more likely to participate in community service as adults (Edwards et al., 2001). By participating in a community based education project, students gain positive perspective of community development and working with community members (Eames-Shevely and Miller, 2008). Because similar dog training classes are offered at local humane societies and shelters, students may be more likely to volunteer in the future. They can apply the skills they learn while working with dogs and dog owners in the dog training class to future experiences.

A total of 29 of the 42 community dog handlers who completed the training class returned the survey resulting in a 69% response rate. The dogs who participated in the class represented 18 different breeds with the most common breeds being Labrador retriever (n = 4), standard poodle (n = 3) and mixed breed (n = 3). The average age of dogs in the classes was 2.5 years old with a range of reported ages of 8 months to 8 years.

No differences were noted in handler survey responses due to gender or session the training class took place. Therefore, means of across all handlers are presented. The community members indicated improvements in their dog's behavior (mean = 4.7, SD = 0.41) and their understanding of dog training (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.55) (Table 2). Participation in training activities is correlated with a decrease in appearance of

*Table 2. Effects on dog training and behavior skills and perception of working with University students of dog owners who participated in an on-campus dog training course.*

Item	Mean	SD
I would recommend this dog training class to others.	4.8	0.41
The class improved my dog's behavior.	4.7	0.53
The class strengthened the bond between my dog and me.	4.6	0.57
The class taught me important dog training skills.	4.7	0.55
I enjoyed taking this course on campus.	4.4	0.82
I enjoyed interacting with students.	4.2	0.83
I found the students to be helpful.	4.2	0.93
Having college students help with the class made it more worthwhile than another dog training course.	3.8	0.93
I felt I was making a positive impact on the students' college experience.	3.9	0.95
I learned something from working with the students.	3.4	1.09
I felt the University was providing an important public service by hosting this dog training class.	4.6	0.91
This experience improved my views of the University.	3.9	0.79
I would recommend UNL to students interested in studying companion animals based on my experience in this dog training class.	4.1	0.99
Ranked on a scale of 1 – 5: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree		

problem behaviors (Bennett and Rohlf, 2007). Training a dog is a way to improve the bond between owner and animal. Participants in the training class indicated that they felt they had a stronger bond with their dog (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.57) which would decrease the likelihood of the dog being relinquished to a shelter. Training increases the likelihood that dog owners will engage in other shared activities with their dog (Bennett and Rohlf, 2007). On the survey, 18 handlers (62%) indicated they were successful passing the CGC exam, one indicated that they felt they would not be successful so they chose not to take the exam and ten indicated they were not planning to take the exam, but did not provide a reason.

The interaction between the university students and the class participants was critical to the success of the class. Dog handlers enjoyed working with the students (mean = 4.2, SD = 0.83) and found the students to be helpful (mean = 4.2, SD = 0.93). Handlers were relatively neutral on if they learned from the students (mean = 3.4, SD = 1.09), but agreed (mean = 3.9, SD = 0.95) that they felt they were making a positive impact on the students' college experience and having the college students help made the class more worthwhile than other dog training classes (mean = 3.8, SD = 0.93). Student participation varied by session offered depending on student's level of interest. Some students preferred to merely observe the training class, while most assisted the trainer with instruction. Students were given the opportunity to work one-on-one with the dog owners and their dogs during the class. This difference in involvement may have impacted the responses in the dog handler survey related to how they felt they worked with the collect students. Students' confidence in assisting the owners may be increased after participation in more than one

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course, but this information was not collected. Some handlers appeared more interested in interacting with the students than others. This may have resulted in the variation in responses to the survey items. Additional ways to get students involved in future sessions should be assessed to ensure the greatest impact for participants. These could be through previously mentioned methods of having students provide presentations or additional instruction to the students before the class on how they can interact with the dog handlers. In many cases, student volunteers are not used for planning or coordinating community service programs (Edwards et al., 2001). Providing more opportunities for students to be involved in and plan activities might be beneficial in their career development. Students were responsible for the planning of the training classes, but were limited in their ability to provide the instruction. Discussions about having students provide educational sessions at the beginning of future dog training classes have occurred. Students would be able to teach on topics they covered in classes such as vaccinations, nutrition or health care topics.

As an added benefit, the dog training class provided a service to the dog owning members of the community. Participants indicated that they would recommend the training class to others (mean = 4.8, SD = 0.41). Completion of a training class increases the likelihood of a dog remaining in the home (Duxbury et al., 2003). The dog handlers enjoyed taking a course on campus (mean = 4.4, SD = 0.82). Community participants in the class left with a slightly improved view of the university (mean = 3.9, SD = 0.82) and felt the university was providing a valuable public service by offering the class (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.91). Those who completed the survey indicated that they would recommend the companion animal program to potential interested students (mean = 4.1, SD = 0.99) which can be critical to continued recruiting efforts to increase enrollment in undergraduate programs. Providing community service at the university could benefit the program through increased awareness and community support. Service projects allow the university to showcase its students and programs offered while providing community education.

Having students assist with a dog training course can provide a valuable form of experiential learning and community service. Animal Science Departments with companion animal programs or interested students could partner with local shelters or other groups offering training programs to help their students gain more hands on experiences. Many shelters have developed internship programs for student volunteers and assisting with behavior programs can be an added outlet to improve students' understanding of animal behavior and handling. Additionally, finding ways to offer courses on

campus may provide a convenient outlet for students to gain this experience while providing a community outreach program.

## Summary and Implications

Offering a dog training course to the community through a university organization such as a student club has many benefits to the students, the community and the university. The demographics in Animal Science programs are changing to include more students interested in companion animals. Most universities have limited opportunities for these students and must look for ways to provide hands on experiences for these students similar to what is provided to students with a livestock interest. Experiences like this allow for improved career development and provide students with a hands-on opportunity to work with dogs and their owners that would not otherwise be provided to them. In addition, the dog training class can serve a role in improved student recruiting as the community becomes more aware of the programs available and may develop stronger ties between the university and community members.

Students benefit by taking advantage of opportunities to become more involved in community service programs. These programs not only provide hands-on learning experience for students, but they are also great ways for students to develop their public and leadership skills. Development of methods to engage the students more directly in the planning and educational process should be evaluated. Students who participate in service projects will develop skills directly needed in the work force as well as be more likely to become life-long volunteers. Partnership opportunities may be available in other areas to provide additional experiential learning for companion animal interested students in the future.

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