

# Texas A&M University Student Life Skill Development and Professional Achievement from Participation on a Collegiate Judging Team

**Clay A. Cavinder<sup>1</sup>, Brooke Byrd<sup>2</sup>,  
Jake Franke<sup>3</sup> and Glenn Holub<sup>1</sup>**  
**Texas A&M University**  
**College Station, TX 77843**



## Abstract

Animal evaluation programs are valued forms of extracurricular learning tools for many youth and collegiate students, as many of these programs have been attributed to improved skills and abilities such as confidence, self-esteem, and critical thinking. A survey was designed to assess how participation on a collegiate judging team affected life skills in the area of personal and career development. Survey results found that judging team involvement and experiences helped develop multiple skills in participants such as: learning the value of hard work and dedication to a common goal, learning to be self-assertive, learning to control anxiety, and respecting others' opinions. Additional skills achieved through judging team participation were: improved verbal communication, patience, confidence as a leader, and confidence in social settings, among other skills. These results give further validation to animal judging and evaluation teams and how they can have a profound effect on participants in personal and professional development.

## Introduction

Judging evaluation programs are well established in many universities as a means to implement greater education in evaluation of numerous types of livestock, meats, and wool. Many of these programs are extracurricular to the education the student receives from core curriculum courses and helps to reinforce what is being learned through classroom teaching. Through many hours of practice students put into these teams, valuable industry knowledge and practical approaches to selection and production are gained. Some might argue that more importantly, other skills are perceived to be developed as well; such as confidence, oral communication, and team work skills (McCann and McCann, 1992; Nash and Sant, 2005; Rusk et al., 2002). Previous work has identified the success that judging programs have on the development of these life skills; however, much of the work has been done on perceived development on 4-H aged youth (Boyd et al., 1992; Nash and Sant, 2005; Rusk et al., 2002) or a wide variety of college students

throughout the country (McCann and McCann, 1992). The current research seeks to identify life skill development in the judging programs of Texas A&M University and the impact that involvement in had on the individual's career development after completing college.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Measure the effectiveness of judging programs on life skill development
2. Evaluate perceived abilities in communication
3. Lend credibility to judging programs as a means of additional, long term education in the college setting

## Methods

Individuals were contacted via email from a mass email list of all Animal Science graduates of Texas A&M University from the Former Student Center or from the Animal Science Department directly. The Texas A&M Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided documented informed consent prior to participation in the study.

In order to meet criteria established for this project, respondents had to have been previous members of an evaluation program consisting of horse, livestock, meats, wool, dairy, or meat animal (Ak-Sar-Ben) and currently in an established career (i.e. graduate programs would not meet eligibility). Validity of the survey was established by a group of industry professionals to insure proper interpretation of each question, as well as to secure the appropriate questioning for this research idea. In this way, face validity was established.

The survey included 25 questions related to the perceived development of life skills through a collegiate judging program and the potential effect it may have had on professional development. The survey was designed to address questions that would provide feedback to the values established in the respondents' career in relation to time invested in a collegiate judging program. Additionally, a specific set of questions were used to evaluate interpersonal skills gained through participation in a judging

<sup>1</sup>Department of Animal Science, Assistant Professor, Ph.D., PAS

<sup>2</sup>Department of Animal Science, B.S. Candidate in Animal Science

<sup>3</sup>Department of Animal Science, Ph.D. Candidate in Animal Science

program (i.e. assertiveness with others, patience, confidence in social situations, etc.). Routinely used response criteria allowed participants to answer: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” “strongly disagree.”

Additionally, some questions asked participants to numerically rank their perception of life skill development that was gained from a judging program. A scale of one to 10, with one being low and 10 being high, was used. The final question asked the respondent to “list the life skill(s) you learned from a judging team that has been the most useful in life and your career.” This was an open ended question that was analyzed through content analysis which provided for grouping of similar characteristic answers.

This study uses descriptive statistical methods to measure learning outcomes. The results include percentages and means in order to summarize and interpret the data. The survey was examined by industry professionals versed in judging and selection in order to establish content validity. Additionally, reliability of the survey question categories was measured using Cronbach's alpha.

## Results and Discussion

A total of 317 completed surveys (identified as 198 male and 119 female; from years judged of 1958 - 2007) were received from former students of Texas A&M University and its judging programs out of approximately 1,100 disseminated surveys (response rate = 29%). Questions concerning judging team involvement or career values and development in interpersonal skills achieved high reliability (Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 and 0.91, respectively). Texas A&M has six active programs and acquired completed surveys from previous team members in all programs (livestock 24.9%; horse 24.5%; meats 22.3%; wool 14.0%; meat animal (Ak-Sar-Ben) 10.8%; dairy 3.5%). The survey asked each participant to briefly describe their current career profession. The most often listed were: Professor – 4.10%, Rancher – 4.10%, Extension agent – 5.36%, Teacher – 5.68%, Sales – 7.89%, Management – 11.36%, and Entrepreneur – 12.93%.

The respondents were first asked if judging provided them with skills essential for their career development or current position. Responses favored

“Strongly Agree” and “Agree” (68.7% and 28.5%, respectively; mean =  $1.34 \pm 0.53$ ) while 2.9% stated “Disagree” and 0.0% “Strongly Disagree.” Following this initial question, the survey continued to ask questions concerning how judging team involvement affected their career with the same choices available (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Answers to questions concerning judging team involvement on the respondent's career indicated they “strongly agreed” (1) to “agreed” (2) that judging team experiences had an effect on multiple skills such as: learning the value of hard work and dedication to a common goal ( $1.31 \pm 0.51$ ), learning to be self-assertive ( $1.41 \pm 0.53$ ), learning to control anxiety ( $1.48 \pm 0.57$ ), and respecting others opinions ( $1.44 \pm 0.55$ ) amongst other results (Table 1).

Additionally, previous judging team members were asked to indicate (on a scale of 1-10; 1 = did not affect, 10 = highly affected) how much they feel that participation on a judging team affected their interpersonal skills (Table 2). Results conclude that verbal communication with others resulted in the highest score ( $8.74 \pm 1.40$ ) while patience was deemed the least ( $7.24 \pm 1.83$ ). As Table 2 indicates,

**Table 1. Mean (±SD) and Frequency of Survey Responses from Questions Concerning if Time spent on a Judging Team Affected the Respondents' Career**

	Mean±SD	Frequency of Response (%)			
		Strongly Agree: 1	Agree: 2	Disagree: 3	Strongly Disagree: 4
Learned the value of hard work and dedication to a common goal	1.31±0.51	226 (71.3)	85 (26.8)	5 (1.6)	1 (0.3)
Learned to maintain my personal opinion while being open minded to the suggestions of others	1.37±0.50	202 (63.7)	113 (35.7)	2 (0.6)	0 (0)
Learned to be self assertive	1.41±0.53	194 (61.2)	117 (36.9)	6 (1.9)	0 (0)
Developed ability to respect others opinions	1.44±0.55	187 (59.0)	123 (38.8)	6 (1.9)	1 (0.3)
Developed a professional public speaking ability	1.47±0.81	204 (64.4)	94 (29.6)	19 (6.0)	0 (0)
Learned to control anxiety in stressful situations while maintaining composure and focus	1.48±0.57	175 (55.4)	130 (41.1)	11 (3.5)	0 (0)
Self esteem was enhanced	1.48±0.59	179 (56.5)	123 (38.8)	15 (4.7)	0 (0)
Learned to interrelate with diverse personality group	1.49±0.59	178 (56.2)	125 (39.4)	13 (4.1)	1 (0.3)
Developed strong time management skills	1.62±1.26	162 (51.3)	131 (41.4)	23 (7.3)	0 (0)

**Table 2. Mean (±SD) Response (1=low, 10=high) for Participation on a Judging Team in Relation to the Development of Interpersonal Skills**

	Mean±SD
Patience	7.24±1.83
Assertiveness with others	7.60±1.79
Ability to work well with others	8.17±1.52
Task and goal priority	8.30±1.52
Confidence in social situations	8.34±1.57
Confidence as a leader	8.59±1.55
Confidence with authority figures	8.61±1.46
Verbal communication with others	8.74±1.40

all mean scores were relatively high on the 1-10 scale.

The last question on the survey asked the participants to specifically list the life skills developed from a judging team that has been the most useful in their life and career. The following are the most popular summarized answers as a percentage of the total responses to this question (n = 265): Teamwork – 8.20%, Communication – 11.67%, Confidence – 11.99%, Public Speaking – 13.56%, and Decision Making – 13.56%.

Current academic curricula aim at preparing the student to be more competent in specific course subject matter. However, the benefits that encompass participation in extracurricular activities, specifically animal evaluation teams, have documented success in life-skill development and work force preparedness (Nash and Sant, 2005). Many judging team participants may initially become involved in such activities with the idea in mind of peaking interest in specific industries (McCann and McCann, 1992); however, arguably more importantly, the current research implies that many skills are gained that directly impact the individual in a more profound way. Beyond achieving better evaluation skills, the participants gain confidence, learn time management skills, develop patience, and establish better oral communication. The attributes established in the current research are in agreement with prior publications that found increased communication skills, teamwork, and organization skills through participation on judging teams (Guthrie and Majeskie, 1997; McCann and McCann, 1992; Nash and Sant, 2005). These skills have been credited by many employers as those competencies necessary for success in many different careers (Berg, 2002; Smith, 1989; Guthrie and Majeskie, 1997). Decision making ability and industry knowledge are also valued by employers of people within the agriculture field (Berg, 2002).

The current data reinforce the successful establishment of communication skills, along with confidence in social settings and confidence as a leader among many other valuable skills. Interestingly, of the surveys received, a high percentage of these people developed careers that required a strong ability in interpersonal and relational skills (i.e. professors and teachers, managers, and entrepreneurs).

These results give validity to judging programs, specifically at Texas A&M University, but also throughout the country, especially those at the collegiate level. Data presented here provide a means to advertise judging programs to college students who may not have had previous opportunities to participate and, therefore, do not know the relevance of such programs. Additionally, budgetary restraints, lack of understanding and/or lack of previous involvement may lead some to believe that extracurricular activities, specifically evaluation teams, are not valuable to students. Reporting the results from the

current research provide clear and credible data that judging team involvement creates an invaluable resource for students to gain critical thinking abilities and develop life-skills that will make them more valuable to employers, and more importantly assist them in being better prepared to deal with all forms of relationships. Also, these programs provide an avenue to supplement theory courses with hands-on experience that prove to be beneficial to careers and lives in general.

## Summary

The results from this study are in agreement with previous reports that emphasize the importance of judging programs within the university setting. Additionally, results illustrate the need for continued support of judging programs as many employers have expressed that preference may be given to potential candidates who have participated on judging teams because of the advantage they may have in areas of communication, critical thinking, and information management. These attributes are valuable components of a college education and provide participants with an advantage in job placement and lend to more success in their chosen profession. Finally, results from this study give further validity to continuance of judging and evaluation programs as an intricate component of a well-rounded education.

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