

Life Skills for College Women and Men Assessment Report—Academic Year 2004-2005

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Overview

At the beginning of the 2004-05 academic year, when Life Skills for College Women and Men converted to a regular course number (rather than a 199), it became eligible for the standard UCLA course evaluations administered by the Office of Instructional Development. Prior to this time, the Health Education Unit had been administering a locally designed course evaluation at the end of the course that asked students to rate various activities, content areas and aspects of course instruction. The switch to UCLA course evaluations was seen as an opportunity to refine the piece of evaluation conducted by the Health Education Unit, specifically to begin to evaluate course outcomes and change more systematically.

Evaluation Design

A pre-test/post-test format was utilized for this evaluation. The questions included in the surveys were based on identified content areas and goals for the course. Specifically, the items were organized around the three main topic areas of the class: stress and coping; communication; and identity development; as well as assessment of academic capability/success. These items focused primarily on the desired behavioral and developmental outcomes of the course, not understanding of specific theory or content.

The survey included 27 statements that respondents rated on a five point scale from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly.” Also included were 8 self-ratings modeled after those developed by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) that asked students to rate their abilities in a variety of areas compared to the “average UCLA student.” An inventory of 17 mental health items developed by RAND was also included. These items are designed to be combined into six overall scale measures¹. Finally, four questions focused on the hours per week students spent both acting proactively (setting goals, caring for self) and having difficulty managing emotions (feeling distressed and overwhelmed).

The surveys were administered on the first and last days of class. The introduction to the survey provided students with information about the purpose of the study (program evaluation and improvement) and assured them that their instructor would not see their responses and their responses would be in no way associated with their grade in the course.

¹ One item from the RAND inventory (moody or brooded about things) was accidentally left off the surveys in Fall and Winter. In order to be able to construct the scales for Mental Health Index, Psychological Distress, and Depression, the mean score derived from the UCLA student population in the 2002 Ashe Center Student Survey was substituted for each individual for both the pre and post test measures. Thus no individual would not show any change on this particular item, but the contribution of other items to change in the overall scale score could be assessed.

Data Analysis

The data included in this report are those collected during Fall Quarter 2004, Winter Quarter 2005, and Spring Quarter 2005. Differences between the three quarters were examined using ANOVA. Very similar results were found for all quarters so the data sets were combined. The overall sample for the three quarters includes matched responses from 253 individuals, a response rate of 71% when compared to the overall enrollment figures for that time. The gender distribution of the group was 70.4% female and 29.6% male. The majority of the students (90.5%) fell into the traditional 18-24 age range with a modal age of 21; the maximum age was 68.

For the majority of items, change from pre- to post-test was evaluated using paired samples t-tests. The significance of changes was evaluated at the 99.9% confidence level ($p < .001$). The evidence of change from pre- to post-test is overwhelming. Positive change was found on 34 of the 41 variables compared using t-tests (see Table 1). Change was also observed in comparisons of pre- and post-test frequencies for the "hours per week" variables (see Tables 2 and 3).

Summary of Results

The following is a summary of results grouped into the four main topic areas.

Stress and Coping: Students showed an increase in positive coping skills and stress reduction, along with a decrease in getting "stuck" with feelings, not able to move on, and feeling alone. The largest change was observed in the item "when stressed I have healthy strategies for relieving the feeling" (a mean increase of 1.01), suggesting that the tangible skills students learn in Life Skills are being put to use in students' lives. The students also showed improved mental health at the end of the quarter as measured by the RAND mental health scales (increase in overall mental health, positive affect, and psychological wellbeing and a decrease in psychological distress and depression). The distributions of responses for the hours per week questions showed an overall increase in the amount of time students spent caring for themselves as well as setting and following through on goals. There was very little change in the measures of feeling overwhelmed and distressed, but it is possible that this is a result of the timing in the quarter—students are completing the post-test in the week prior to final exams which may influence their responses to these items.

Identity Development: Students showed increased ease with their selves and in the relationship of self to others, including being more confident in their ability to develop friendships.

Communication: Students showed increased confidence in their communication skills in a variety of settings, including difficult situations, ability communicate their own needs, and communication within a sexual or romantic relationship. Interestingly, the change in confidence communicating with "people different from me" was greater than the change in confidence in communicating overall. This suggests that Life Skills may give students valuable skills that they can use in civil discourse with people who may have views different from their own.

Academic Success: Students showed increased confidence in their academic skills and abilities in general, as well as increased confidence that they can succeed at UCLA specifically.

Table 1: Mean Scores for Pre and Post Test Measures with Significant Change (p<.001)

	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Change
Stress and Coping			
<i>Increase:</i>			
I am comfortable asking others for support and input in making decisions*	3.75	4.27	0.52
My coping skills work well for me*	3.31	3.83	0.52
When I feel stressed I have healthy strategies for relieving the feeling*	2.86	3.87	1.01
Self Rating: Emotional Health^	3.29	3.64	0.35
RAND Mental Health Index~	63.83	68.26	4.42
RAND Positive Affect Scale~	61.54	66.58	5.04
RAND Psychological Wellbeing Scale~	62.76	68.49	5.72
<i>Decrease:</i>			
I have to rely on myself because I can't count on others*	3.07	2.80	0.27
I am unable to successfully cope with changes in my life*	2.36	2.04	0.32
When I am upset I tend to dwell on my feelings for a long time*	3.50	3.18	0.33
RAND Psychological Distress Scale~	35.66	31.80	3.86
RAND Depression Scale~	33.50	29.30	4.21
Identity Development			
<i>Increase:</i>			
It is important to be knowledgeable about cultural differences*	4.47	4.63	0.16
It is easy for me to develop new friendships*	3.47	3.79	0.33
It is easy to make new friends at UCLA*	3.02	3.53	0.51
I am able to challenge aspects of my upbringing that are not supportive of my wellbeing*	3.56	4.00	0.45
I have friends who are different from me (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.)*	4.22	4.40	0.17
Self Rating: Drive to Achieve^	3.74	3.90	0.17
Self Rating: Leadership Ability^	3.45	3.79	0.34
Self Rating: Social Self Confidence^	3.39	3.75	0.36
Self Rating: Understanding of Others^	3.74	4.08	0.34
<i>Decrease:</i>			
I am unhappy with my physical appearance*	2.80	2.52	0.29
Communication and Relationships			
<i>Increase:</i>			
I feel confident communicating with others*	3.79	4.25	0.46
I feel confident in communicating with people who are different from me*	3.75	4.30	0.55
I feel comfortable communicating about sex*	3.56	3.94	0.38
I am able to communicate my needs in a romantic relationship*	3.34	3.59	0.25
When I am upset I generally can articulate what is bothering me*	3.34	3.76	0.40
I have the skills I need to communicate my needs to others*	3.50	4.08	0.58
I feel confident in my ability to address difficult situations or concerns with other people*	3.24	3.83	0.59
Academic Success			
<i>Increase:</i>			
I have what it takes to succeed at UCLA*	3.83	4.16	0.33
I feel confident in my ability to handle the academic demands at UCLA*	3.53	3.99	0.46
When faced with a problem I am generally confident that I have the critical thinking skills necessary to solve it*	3.81	4.21	0.40
Self Rating: Academic Ability^	3.41	3.58	0.16
Self Rating: Intellectual Self Confidence^	3.33	3.71	0.38

*5-pt Scale 1=Disagree Strongly to 5=Agree Strongly

^5-pt Scale 1=Lowest 10% to 5=Highest 10%

~Scale item range: 0=none of the time to 100=all of the time

Table 2: Pre and Post Comparison of the Percent of Students Indicating Frequency of Activities in a Typical Week

	Take time to care for myself		Set and follow through on goals for self	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Never	5.2	1.6	5.2	1.2
Once a week	19.9	13.2	23.3	12.0
2-3 times a week	30.7	34.0	34.1	33.7
4-5 times a week	14.3	24.8	19.7	33.3
Daily	29.9	26.4	17.7	19.7

Table 3: Pre and Post Comparison of the Percent of Students Indicating Frequency of Experiences in a Typical Week

	Feel Overwhelmed		Feel Distressed	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Never	6.0	4.8	16.9	7.6
Once a week	32.7	25.3	31.3	36.1
2-3 times a week	34.3	35.3	34.5	36.5
4-5 times a week	16.3	22.9	7.6	15.7
Daily	10.8	11.6	9.6	4.0

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the limitations that must be discussed is the possibility of bias due to students' desire to please the instructors. Every effort was made to avoid this by informing students that their responses would not be viewed by their instructors and not connected to their grade in any way, as well as having the instructors leave the room while the post-test was administered (along with regular course evaluations). Future research could attempt to eliminate this source of bias by distributing the survey outside of the classroom setting, but would likely result in a significantly lower response rate.

Another limitation of this analysis is the lack of a control group. Because there is no comparison group of students who did not enroll in Life Skills, it is impossible to say with certainty that these changes are a result of participation in the course not simply changes in the UCLA population that were occurring more widely. Future research would benefit from inclusion of a control group, possibly drawn from the waitlist (students who desired to take the class), the undergraduate population at large, or both.