

A VETERINARY SCIENCE INITIATIVE: AN ANALYSIS OF IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR HUMANE EDUCATION AND COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

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Humane education research is limited in its scope and structure and this has led to its inability to find a place in standard curriculum. As resources become scarcer for school districts and shelters, proving efficacy of programs is essential for successful partnerships and program achievements. VSI: Veterinary Science Initiative is a program developed by the education team at the Charleston Animal Society as a model for cooperative education between shelters, veterinarians, and other private organizations to collaborate with local school districts, while also conducting research about how this curriculum benefits student knowledge, organizational awareness, and community engagement.

The focus of this research is in two primary areas: to examine the efficacy of the program through changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and evaluation of student products, surveys and observations, and to look the impact of the program as a model from a collaborative leadership perspective. Insights from this analysis can shape science education, humane education, and collaborative educational initiatives. The multimodal approach adopted in this research includes: comparing pre and posttest participant and control groups, evaluating rubric-based student products, tracking behavioral changes between control and participant groups, and collecting student and teacher surveys.

Using these assessments, the VSI program produced significant changes in the participants' behavior, attitudes, and knowledge. After the program, participants had significantly higher rates of spaying and neutering their pets, signing up as volunteers, and producing enrichment for the shelter animals versus control groups. Students also showed increases in awareness of the shelter, gains in knowledge presented in the program, and changes in attitude statements regarding spay-neuter, animal welfare, behavioral changes, and veterinary care for their pets.

Based on these results, it is recommended that humane education shifts focus to a more behavior-driven model that can appeal to animal shelters, schools, and their students. Long-term assessment of changes in behavior might not only be a more powerful assessment of student engagement, but also helps document directly and tangibly the benefits of such programs to nonprofit organizations. Also, shelters should look toward high school focused programs that can allow students to take action and participate directly in the shelter community. Importance of control groups and pre and posttest assessments are reinforced by the findings. Implications for best practices in curricular development and instruction for a diverse population are discussed. Larger sample size would allow for a more accurate and complex model of impact from the program based on multiple covariates such as pet ownership, ethnicity, and school. In the future, more elaborate analysis of factors impacting humane education, science attitudes, and long-term student behaviors would be beneficial.