

The effect of companion animal presence in the classroom on student belonging

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Introduction and Objective

Human interaction with companion animals has been shown to decrease stress, lower blood pressure and reduce fear (Friedmann et al., 1983; Barker et al., 2003; Malai, 2014).

College campuses nationwide have successfully introduced therapy pet programs as interventions for student stress (Aiken and Cadmus, 2011; Franks et al., 2016).



Given the impact of human-canine interaction on human physiologic and behavioral stress, we wondered how companion animal presence in the higher education classroom would impact student learning, specifically student belonging. The following study investigates the effect of companion animal (canine) presence, not interaction, in the classroom. Specifically, we examined if the presence of a dog would impact, positively or negatively, students' feelings of belonging.



Methods and Results

PARTICIPANTS: Sixty-nine UW-River Falls students. Dog in Classroom test group = 35, Dog Not in Classroom control group= 34.

QUESTIONNAIRE and DESIGN: The pre- and post-test survey assessed student belonging, including measures of classroom and community belonging. The post-test asked participants how much they enjoyed the class, as well as how much they learned overall. Measures used 5-point and 7-point Likert-type scales.

The study used a 2 x 2 mixed methods format, looking within the pre- and post- questionnaires, and between a classroom having a dog (test) and one without (control).

RESULTS: The results of the study found that there were no differences between the control and experimental sections in terms of student belonging, class enjoyment, or perceived learning (independent samples T-tests ranged from -0.63 to 1.4; p values ranged from 0.30 to 0.55).

Results also showed that belonging increased from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the control and experimental (dog present classes). Because there was no difference between classes, we collapsed across them and paired samples. T-tests showed a significant increase for classroom community ($T(68) = -4.197, p < .01$) and school community ($T(68) = -3.13, p < .01$).

Results and Discussion

DISCUSSION:

The results of our study suggest that the presence of a dog in the higher education classroom will neither increase nor decrease student belonging. Both control and test groups experienced increased sense of classroom and university community, with no difference in observed learning. Professor evaluation was positive for both control and test groups; canine presence in this study model did not positively impact student belonging, nor did canine presence appear to inhibit student belonging.

Limitations of this study include:

- homogenous participant sampling – students were predominantly white females between 18 and 22 years old.
- academic position - the control group was predominantly first semester, first-year students; test group was predominantly third and fourth-year students.
- overall positive learning environment - student evaluations of the professor, were all positive, indicating an overall-positive learning environment regardless of companion animal presence.



Literature Cited

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