Characteristics and Communication Influence Student Risk Tolerance

Students who are afraid to take chances may miss valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth. Recognizing characteristics that influence risk tolerance, and the impact of simple classroom communication, can inform the efforts of college agriculture instructors to encourage student success.

A newly published article in *Natural Sciences Education* describes a year-long study at Illinois State University where students in a farm management class assessed their own risk tolerance. Through the use of “cheap talk” (a non-binding, non-verifiable message), approximately half of the class was informed that people generally say they are willing to take more risk than they actually take in real-life situations.

Male students were significantly more risk tolerant than their female classmates; risk tolerance also increased among transfer students, seniors, and those from farm backgrounds. However, the cheap talk statement led to lower reported risk tolerance, suggesting that simple messages may affect students’ perceptions.

When instructors understand the characteristics that affect students’ risk tolerance, they are better equipped to help their students navigate the challenges that college presents both in and out of the classroom. This study also suggests that professors should be mindful of their words as casual phrases matter in classroom communication.