

# The Co-curricular Connection: The Impact of Experiences Beyond The Classroom on Soft Skills

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For many years, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has been producing *Job Outlook*, a report that assesses the intention of businesses to hire new employees from the graduating class and articulates the skills and qualities that employers are looking for beyond the specific qualifications of the job.

This last piece is often referred to as "soft skills," though as Kamenetz (2015) points out, "There are at least seven major overlapping terms in play" and "New ones are being coined all the time." No matter what you call them or how you slice them, there is a lot of agreement that soft skills are important.

For many years, the qualities that employers identify as important through *Job Outlook* have remained largely unchanged. They shift in relative position, but the skills themselves stay consistent: the ability to work in a team; make decisions/solve problems; communicate; plan, organize, and prioritize work; and so forth. (See Figure 1.) The fact that these are sometimes referred to as "non-academic skills" implies that they aren't necessarily gained from a student classes in college (Kamenetz, 2015). So where do students acquire them?

**Figure 1: Employers rate the importance of candidate skills/qualities**

Skill/Quality	Weighted average rating*
Ability to work in a team structure	4.55
Ability to make decisions and solve problems	4.50
Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization	4.48
Ability to obtain and process information	4.37
Ability to analyze quantitative data	4.25
Technical knowledge related to the job	4.01
Proficiency with computer software programs	3.94
Ability to create and/or edit written reports	3.62
Ability to sell or influence others	3.54

\*5-point scale, where 1=Not at all important; 2=Not very important; 3=Somewhat important; 4=Very important; and 5=Extremely important

Source: *Job Outlook 2014*, National Association of Colleges and Employers

In spring 2014, the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) and NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation, with the support of their respective boards, launched a working group to look at how the skills gained through participation and employment in co-curricular experiences helped to prepare students for their careers. The goal of the project was to identify ways that students are gaining skills that make them more desirable to employers by participating in programs in collegiate recreation and campus activities, and by engaging in student employment in the fields of collegiate recreation and campus activities. The team

was comprised of senior-level staff from both associations, current and former members of their boards of directors, and senior scholar/practitioners with a history of involvement in the organizations.

This group worked to narrow the scope of the project to considering how participation and employment in co-curricular contexts might influence the soft skills identified by NACE as important to employers. The work team developed the white paper "Considering the Impact of Participation and Employment of Students in Campus Activities and Collegiate Recreation on the Development of the Skills Employers Desire Most" (Peck et al., 2015). This publication sought to change the narrative and drive the conversation with college and university administrators, employers, and other stakeholders by clearly demonstrating the value of such programs as part of the student's overall educational experience.

In recent years, there has been much conversation about the ability of higher education to produce graduates with the skills necessary for the work force. The idea of the "liberal education," in which college offers transformative experiences that help students develop more than just vocational skills, has been called into question. Instead, sadly, many seek to prepare graduates for the world of work with training that is increasingly vocational in nature. In a recent editorial by Paula Krebs (2015), she writes, "The more we can move the public conversation to see the value of an integrated, liberal-arts education, the more employers will see our graduates as well prepared for the workplace," (Krebs, 2015).

Co-curricular experiences can provide a place for transformative educational experiences to grow in a variety of educational structures because experiential learning focuses on the development of the whole student. As Alexander Astin (1993), a pioneer in student affairs stated, these experiences are "essential to the development of a well-rounded individual and numerous activities offer a positive impact on students' emotional, intellectual, and interpersonal development" (p. 35). For example, Astin singles out, student government as "...one of the best ways to get involved and develop skills such as organizing, planning, and communicating." Adding empirical support, Hall (2005) found by participating in campus recreation programs, students reported improved communication skills, better organizing and time management skills, and an ability to get along with others.

It is evident that employers will continue to challenge higher education to produce candidates who are better prepared for the work force (Drucker, 2014). As technology and choices continue to evolve, students also will evaluate colleges and universities based on programs/curriculum that can enhance their employment candidacy (Hullinger, 2015). Students are becoming better informed consumers, thinking about the impact of their experiences on their ultimate goal of graduating and finding employment when they graduate. Whereas previous students considering a college or university might be most concerned with looking at the availability of Greek life on campus or the amenities of the residence halls in which they might live, modern students are asking tougher questions like "When can I start an internship?" (Connor & Fringer, 2015).

For student affairs to be sustainable and thrive, finding ways to teach students to understand and articulate the skills gained from employment and involvement in those co-curricular experiences will be essential (Peck et al. 2015). This can involve integrating career readiness into a variety of different experiences beyond the career center, but few know how to put this guidance into practice.

## **Models for Fostering Skill Development**

One opportunity for developing these skills that is overlooked surprisingly often is student employment. Skills developed from student work in a variety of contexts offer myriad possible outcomes, but these outcomes are not always intentionally developed. One model with tremendous promise is the University of Iowa's "Iowa Grow" program, which uses brief, structured conversations between student employees and their supervisors to help students connect the skills and knowledge they are gaining in the classroom with their student work, and vice versa (Iowa Grow, n.d). These conversations occur twice a semester and can be done in triads or dyads. Students complete a student employment survey, and focus groups have been

conducted with supervisors that yielded improvements in supervisor relationship and training curriculum (Hansen, 2015).

Connecting students with business leaders can help student leaders to think about how the skills they gain can be applied to their life beyond college. The University of Memphis Professional Connections Program connects business professionals with a group of student leaders for guided conversations about professional and personal development (LEAD, 2015). The three-part curriculum includes instruction on personal branding, network development, and interview preparation that focuses on highlighting skills gleaned from co-curricular experiences. The program combines an intentional focus on network development along with enhanced awareness of competencies acquired from campus involvement (LEAD, 2015). The University of Florida Campus Recreation Department has connected students with mentors, providing students with the opportunity to receive guidance throughout their collegiate experience. Student learning, development, and enrichment are achieved through one-on-one interaction between mentors and mentees, small group interactions, and program-wide events.

Students benefit from programs that expose them to new skills that can help them impress potential employers and get the job. But embedded in this challenge is not only the development of skills, but the ability to articulate these skills. At the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, "Seahawks Taking Flight" is a co-curricular capstone program that helps students recognize and articulate the skills they have gained from a variety of experiences in college. The program begins with an inventory exercise identifying college accomplishments. The student then crafts and practices a "30-second elevator pitch" in which he or she explains how these accomplishments could benefit future employers (Taking Flight, 2015). Student reflections indicated a new awareness regarding skills attained and value for future employment (Connor & Fringer, 2015).

The Certified Student Leader program at Stephen F. Austin State University is another example of a program that helps students gain and articulate skills. Students can apply for certification in five areas related to key soft skills: written and verbal communication skills, organization skills, ability to influence, decision-making skills, and ability to work in a team. Students learn about these skills from a variety of regularly scheduled trainings; once a student believes he or she has achieved mastery in a given skill, the student submits a resume detailing the experiences that developed that skill and a cover letter providing a narrative with in-depth information. These are sent to faculty and staff reviewers who determine if the student earns the certification. Students who receive all five certifications receive status as a "certified student leader." The promise of this program is that it recognizes the diverse ways that students gain these skills.

## **Project CEO Study**

Many institutions are developing strategies to extend career development and education beyond the traditional career center and to infuse career education into a variety of programs outside the classroom. While many assume that students can develop these skills in co-curricular experiences, data have been largely anecdotal or lacking.

To remedy this, a group of student affairs assessment professionals from across the country launched a national benchmarking study of the development of co-curricular experience in spring 2014. Forty institutions signed up for the Project CEO study (co-curricular experience outcomes), which was sponsored by Campus Labs. All of these were four-year institutions. Approximately 70 percent of the participating institutions were public, while 30 percent were private. In terms of size, 20 percent were categorized as small (<=5,000 students), 40 percent were medium sized (5,001 – 15,000 students), and about 40 percent were large (> 15,000 students).

The study sought to measure which experiences students found most impactful with regard to developing the skills identified through the *Job Outlook* survey. Experiences considered in the survey were students' classes, internships, co-curricular experiences, and a student's job on or off campus. (Note: For purposes of

the study, co-curricular experiences were defined as "participation in organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, or academic groups/honor societies.")

Students were able to rate their ability according to each of the skills studied. A host of other demographic factors were also studied.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Respondents Who Said They Gained Skill From Each Experience**

Skill	Classes	Internships	Cocurricular Experiences	On-Campus Job	Off-Campus Job	Didn't Develop This Skill
Teamwork	65.5%	20.3%	47.9%	18.4%	29.4%	4.6%
Verbal Communication	70.4%	25.3%	45.8%	21.4%	35.4%	4.9%
Decision Making	60.0%	26.4%	41.2%	19.1%	35.1%	10.1%
Problem Solving	70.4%	26.8%	39.7%	20.5%	36.1%	6.2%
Obtaining and Processing Information	84.1%	24.8%	30.2%	17.1%	28.4%	4.2%
Planning, Organizing, Prioritizing	78.7%	25.9%	40.1%	19.9%	34.2%	5.8%
Processing Quantitative Data	81.6%	17.3%	14.6%	10.2%	17.3%	7.6%
Career-Specific Information	80.3%	32.7%	26.2%	11.1%	19.7%	5.8%
Computer Skills	64.9%	19.2%	11.7%	12.8%	17.5%	19.1%
Influence/Sales	37.5%	19.6%	28.4%	11.7%	32.5%	20.4%
Writing/Editing	85.1%	16.8%	12.8%	9.2%	11.6%	6.8%

Vincent Tinto (2012) wrote, "I have come to appreciate the centrality of the classroom to student success" (p. viii). With regard to the development of employment skills, this effect holds up. In all skills, students indicated that the classroom was the experience that had a significant impact on their skill development.

However, our enthusiasm for developing employment skills through classroom learning must be checked with the knowledge that the classroom has a significant advantage over other learning experiences. It is the only element considered in this study that is required of all students. To be a student, one must take classes. So, a student's indication of whether or not he or she has gained important skills from these experiences is only useful if the student has had these experiences. Internships may be powerful learning experiences, but only 28 percent of students in the study had participated in an internship in the previous year. A little more than 29 percent had held a job on campus, and approximately 42 percent had held a job off campus. By comparison, around 65 percent of the students in the study had participated in co-curricular experiences in the previous year. In this context, co-curricular experiences have tremendous potential. Not only do they appear to considerably impact the skills employers want, but the number of students participating suggests that they have the capacity to impact students' career development on a large scale.

Considering non-classroom experiences, in six of the 11 skills investigated in the Project CEO study, co-curricular experiences were the most likely to be selected by students as significantly contributing to their knowledge of the skills employers desired. These skills were "teamwork," "verbal communication," "decision making," "problem solving," "obtaining and processing information" and "planning, organizing, and prioritizing work." In four of the skills, internships were more influential. These areas included "analyzing quantitative data," "career-specific knowledge," "computer skills," and "writing and editing." The only skill in which co-curricular experiences or internships were not the most influential was "influencing and selling," which students indicated was most likely to be developed through their off-

campus jobs. When you consider the types of jobs that students often have in retail sales or food service, this finding makes logical sense.

Adding further support for the conclusion that co-curricular skills contribute considerably to students' development of soft skills is the students' self-ratings of skills related to their involvement in and leadership of experiences in co-curricular experiences. The condition of "not involved" was defined as students not participating in the co-curricular experiences identified previously. "Involved" was defined as students participating in co-curricular experiences and "leader" was defined as a student who indicated he or she was leading these experiences. With the exception of "computer proficiency," students tended to rate their skills higher the more involved they were.

Some might say that perhaps students aren't really gaining these skills; that, in fact, students with higher levels of involvement or leadership simply are more confident in these skills. It is true that due to the self-reported nature of the data in this study, it is not possible to determine if the effect we see is due to skill or confidence. But the case could also be made that both outcomes would be desirable. Many students see their college experience as a process of checking off classes and accumulating credits that many fail to see the transformational qualities of learning. If participation in co-curricular experiences simply makes students more aware of the skills they are developing and more confident in these skills, our emphasis on co-curricular learning would be well justified.

**Figure 3: Self-Ratings (Mean Score) in Each Skill by Involvement**

Not Involved Involved Leader  
 Teamwork Verbal Decisions Solve Problems Information Plan &  
 Organize Analyze Quantitative Technical Knowledge Computer Proficiency Write & Edit Sell &  
 Influence 0.51.01.52.02.53.03.54.0

Skill	Not Involved	Involved	Leader
Teamwork	3.27	3.52	3.68
Verbal	3.22	3.46	3.65
Decisions	3.34	3.39	3.52
Solve Problems	3.41	3.55	3.69
Information	3.34	3.48	3.61
Plan & Organize	3.3	3.52	3.7
Analyze Quantitative	2.85	3.01	3.1
Technical Knowledge	2.77	2.96	3.14
Computer Proficiency	2.99	2.94	3.01
Write & Edit	3	3.14	3.29
Sell & Influence	2.75	2.84	2.95

## Potential for Connecting Co-Curricular Involvement With Skill Development

The movement to connect co-curricular involvement to the development of skills desired by employers has great potential to address a range of issues facing employers, career development professionals, and practitioners who work in co-curricular/experiential education.

For employers, this may provide a way to identify students who are more likely to possess the skills they desire by spotlighting involved students and student leaders. For career development professionals, partnerships with colleagues in co-curricular experiences may provide new models for developing students' career-readiness skills. Finally, for those who oversee co-curricular programs, a focus on teaching and

measuring career skills can help the profession to demonstrate the impact such programs have in helping students gain entry to the work force after graduation.

This approach deserves additional consideration and study. As best practices and data emerge from this focus, these need to be shared broadly in ways that can drive continuous improvement in both our understanding of this topic and our ability to further the mutual goal of enhancing students' readiness for and success in their careers.

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