Teaching Community College Students the Soft Skills Demanded by Employers

Many of us in community colleges work with employers and students. Therefore, we seek to understand what employers need in future employees, then we prepare students to fill those roles. This process is relatively straight forward when it comes to teaching technical skills, but how do we teach students soft skills? Possessing the requisite technical skills may get students an interview. However, soft skills are what get students jobs and are what help them keep their jobs.

According to a 2014 study conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of CareerBuilder, 77 percent of employers surveyed indicated they were specifically seeking candidates with soft skills, and 16 percent of those respondents considered such qualities more important than technical skills. The top 10 soft skills that surveyed companies were seeking in candidates included:

- A strong work ethic (73%)
- Dependability (73%)
- A positive attitude (72%)
- Self-motivation (66%)
- Team-orientation (60%)
- Organizational skills and managing multiple priorities (57%)
- Working well under pressure (57%)
- Effective communication (56%)
- Flexibility (51%)
- Confidence (46%)

Teaching Soft Skills to College Students: What Works?

Based on a 2013 Seattle Jobs Initiative Study of four-year colleges, community colleges, and workforce development organizations, the best practices in soft skills development and assessment include:

1. Setting clear expectations regarding soft skills.
2. Incorporating soft skills in grading systems and assessment processes.
3. Helping students continuously practice soft skills and providing them with feedback.
4. Incorporating real-world situations and environments.
5. Encouraging professional communication between students and their peers, faculty, and community.
6. Maintaining a learning organization culture.

Clearly these best practices involve embedding soft skills into all aspects of the student experience and indicate that students need the opportunity to continuously practice these skills in real-world situations.

A study from the University of Portland's School of Education tracked the ability of students to improve their listening, teamwork, and responsibility when soft skills content was embedded into regular technical classroom content. Through a focus on soft skills in different settings, how soft skills are manifested behaviorally, and helping students see when a lack of soft skills created problems, results showed students improved in these areas over the course of a semester.

While some instructors do well at providing opportunities for students to develop soft skills in their classes, it is important to remember that institutions hire instructors based on their technical skills and expertise in a particular field. While a Career and Technical Education instructor may be incredible at teaching students lean manufacturing, he or she may be less sure about how to adequately embed soft skills instruction into their course content.

While it is necessary to provide professional development to support all instructors in incorporating soft skills into their courses, perhaps a course that intentionally dives into soft skills development could also be offered as a supplement to technical education courses. In doing so, students are exposed to critical thinking and other soft skills at a deeper level. Plus, they have more time to focus on the analysis required to truly ponder big and complicated topics. Maybe by approaching soft skills with this multipronged approach, colleges can better support student success in this area.

Offering a Soft Skills Course to Supplement Technical Training

Based on personal experience in workforce development at a community college, it is not uncommon to hear employers say, "If you can find me someone for an entry-level position that will show up on time, be responsible, and get along with coworkers, I can teach them the rest." When tasked with doing this through a grant-funded program that identifies, trains, and places economically disadvantaged students with inconsistent work histories into local manufacturing jobs, we developed a special course that emphasizes soft skills attainment.

The foundational program includes manufacturing content, basic academic skill development, and work hardening experience; however, in the end, the soft skills class called "Workplace Professionalism" is very popular. The course may be popular because, for the first time, many students are able to intentionally devote time to discussions, readings, questions, activities, and assignments that are all immediately relevant across every area of their lives.

While many students get this kind of guidance and support from family or other support systems, this is not the case for the economically disadvantaged students. In this instance, it is the first time ever many students peer into their future, have the opportunity to work intentionally with a dedicated instructor around their soft skills development, and get feedback on how to improve.

Although one course will not allow students to master the soft skills employers desire, in this case, it helps open students' eyes and minds to a new way of viewing work and their ability to be successful in that world.

The remainder of this article highlights the "Workplace Professionalism" course that our community college offers to supplement technical course work in a manufacturing program.

"Workplace Professionalism" – The Course

Session 1: Attitude, Goal Setting, and Life Management

A guided exercise called "Mirror Words" helps students identify their core beliefs about who they are. In-class discussions focus on identifying students' personality traits and how these traits impact interactions with others. The session concludes with an exercise in goal setting, which walks students through the process so they can better understand how creating steps toward a goal is critical to achieving success.

Session 2: Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Students engage in discussions to understand the meaning of emotional intelligence (EI) and how it impacts their daily lives. Additionally, students take an EI assessment that reveals insights into their levels of personal competence (i.e., self-awareness and self-management) and social competence (i.e., social awareness and relationship management). After the assessment, students are divided into groups by their EI similarity and then use instructor-provided resources to identify how to build upon their EI strengths and overcome challenges.

Session 3: Time and Stress Management; Organizational Skills

This session covers physical and emotional responses to situations. Armed with this information, students better understand the negative impacts of stress, the level of which is revealed via a life stress quiz. Students practices strategies for dealing with stress and identify where and how time is wasted on unproductive activities every day, as well as how these activities result in having less time to focus on important things and/or feeling stress due to procrastination.

Session 4: Ethics, Politics, and Diversity; Accountability and Workplace Relationships

During this session, students dissect various types of power to see how they do or do not currently possess power, which helps them to better understand how and when different kinds of power are used. A guided self-reflection helps students uncover how they currently feel stereotyped, as well as how they may stereotype others. This session also highlights the implications of stereotyping in the workplace and ways to address or challenge co-workers and supervisors with regard to stereotypes.

Session 5: Quality Organizations and Services; Human Resources and Policies

Employee productivity and its impact on organizational success are discussed, with emphasis placed on the employee role in waste and profit. Examples of good customer service are provided for internal and external customers, and students revisit previous course content to reflect on how they would suggest dealing with challenging situations. The role of Human Resources is discussed to assure students are clear about the legal aspects of employee advocacy and protections. Important policies and legislation related to employer and employee rights are highlighted.

Session 6: Communication (Including Electronic Communication)

This session highlights the importance of good interpersonal communication skills, and students brainstorm negative consequences of miscommunication. Students work on identifying their own personal communication style and develop new tactics to listen and communicate more effectively. An activity about the use of slang light-heartedly emphasizes how easy it can be to assume understanding, when in reality the message one is sending can be very unclear. The session concludes by recognizing possible challenges in communicating clearly when communicating electronically.

Session 7: Motivation, Leadership, and Teams; Conflict Negotiation

Students discuss the various roles one can play on a team, then they work individually to identify the roles each student naturally tends to gravitate toward. The session presents a deeper analysis of conflict styles, and students provide examples of when each style does or does not work well. Students also take an assessment to determine their natural conflict style, then in small groups talk about when their conflict style had been either an asset or a detriment in different situations.

Session 8: Career Changes and Review

This final session discusses leaving employment on good terms, and students point out negative consequences of failing to do so. The instructor provides examples that highlight practical aspects of leaving a position, such as letters of resignation, employer references, and appropriate behavior. Additionally, the class discusses the importance of continual training and development. Students provide

examples from the other sessions to demonstrate that their learning of these course topics should be lifelong.

Considerations for Further Discussion

While the above is only a high-level overview of the topics included in the "Workplace Professionalism" class, one can see the breadth of complicated and often subjective topics the class covers. It is relatively straight-forward to merely identify the topics discussed in the class; however, there are also critically important aspects of the course that help make it successful:

- It is critical to start with a large group conversation to assure a shared understanding of terms and concepts. Traditional lecture style content delivery should be kept to a minimum to immediately engage students in applying the content to their lives.

- Students have inconsistent and often limited work experience, so it is helpful to first let them apply the concepts to their personal lives, then move on to application in a work environment.

- The use of abundant in-class assessments and activities provide tangible ways for students to immediately look more deeply into their reality.

- As with any class, it is important to be fun and engaging!

- One of the most critical aspects of the course is that the instructor is able to quickly develop rapport and trust with the students. This is greatly aided by the instructor approaching students from a place of respect; helping them feel safe in expressing thoughts and opinions; being aware of power dynamics; and being able to effectively facilitate productive and engaging conversations around potentially emotionally charged topics.

Having created a class at a community college to specifically develop students' soft skills, the question becomes: "Is it possible to teach soft skills to students solely in a classroom setting in a way that allows them to masterfully develop and use these skills in their lives?"

I would argue that the answer to this question is "no," because it takes real-world practice and application to truly master these sometimes fuzzy skills. However, I would also argue that there is a responsibility to enhance soft skills development through a dedicated course with a capable instructor, especially for students who lack support systems or mentors.

When an institution maintains soft skills development as a priority through interactions with students, emphasizes the importance of these skills through technical coursework, and provides students with feedback about their progress, the importance of soft skills becomes clear to students. Yet, by adding an entire course to help students personally wrestle with these often-challenging ideas, I believe the message we are sending about soft skills is even stronger and clearer. The message being, "We will not only help you develop your technical expertise, but also the life skills critical to achieving your goals. We value your development as a 'whole' person. We will support you in wrestling with personal reflections and critical thinking to develop all the skills needed to arrive at the future you envision."

How do you help students develop soft skills? Tell us in the comment section or on Facebook!

Kimberlee Andrews-Bingham, *Coordinator of Lifelong Learning*

For further information, contact the author at Kellogg Community College, 450 North Avenue, Battle Creek, Michigan 49017. Email: andrewsk@kellogg.edu

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