

Recognizing the Value of Soft Skills in College

We all see those students in our classrooms—the ones with that certain casual attitude towards attendance, participation, and communication in general. They have experienced a lifetime of getting a “pass” for missed deadlines and exhibiting disrespect or belligerence, for which they know there will be few or no consequences. Their sense of entitlement, even given a lack of effort or real contribution (fostered by the “everyone gets a trophy” philosophy), has contributed to general apathy and poor preparation for the world of work. Employers are looking for employees who can successfully handle interpersonal interactions, as well as solve complex problems. Many millennial students have a very different perspective, thinking that all they need are the necessary hard skills and a diploma to qualify for a position. Instructors can’t necessarily reverse that misconception, but we can create an environment with heightened expectations and standards that draw out more positive behaviors and reinforce the importance of the soft skills needed to meet the demands of the 21st century workforce.

What exactly do these “21st century workforce skills” entail? In a nutshell, according to the *Glossary of Education Reform* (2015), these skills include the ability to:

- Think critically and problem-solve effectively as a result,
- Use effective research strategies to collect credible and reliable data to support a point of view,
- Use creative and imaginative thought to explore new and different ways to communicate personal perspective and the skills to present that information publicly,
- Work effectively with a diverse group of other individuals in any environment (e.g., in a team, as a leader, in a common space), and
- Maintain throughout the process a strong information and technical literacy to perform in each of these tasks.

In traditional college classes, there are a number of circumstances and situations that require the use of soft skills. However, often instructors are so focused on their discipline-specific content that they miss the opportunity to reinforce soft skills as a part of their curriculum. Rather than making soft skills a separate “lesson” in a class, instructors can infuse these behaviors and skill-building activities into their existing content and set standards that reinforce the behaviors.

In our Managing Your Success classes, we use a number of different assignments and some departmental policies that emphasize the soft skills that are so important to develop and strengthen in the proving grounds of college. A few of these policies and assignments are shared here.

- Classroom Behavior Management – The School of Student Life Skills instructors learn students’ names within the first two weeks of class and address students by name in discussions and interactions. They also set the expectation that students know their instructors’ names and how they prefer to be addressed (Dr. Jones, Ms. Smith). Students are expected to use the appropriate name and title in all communications (in class and via email). Part of the conversation in the first week of class explains the importance of respect and acknowledging each other appropriately as we address one another in a variety of settings.
- Attendance Policy – A departmental attendance policy is a common practice. However, in our class, it is included as a part of the curriculum. Students are provided with the policy, but we also discuss why it exists, why the penalty is progressive, the appropriate way to communicate if an absence occurs, and the importance of why being present not only physically, but also mentally, affects the quality of work produced. It sounds so simple, but that conversation engages students, helps them think more critically about expectations, and introduces problem solving when consequences of actions are discussed. It also provides an avenue to begin the discussion about effective communication techniques.
- Email Your Instructor – This assignment is also elemental, but is an excellent way to establish good habits. Students are required to send their instructor an email that includes specific details in the subject line and in the message. It includes a greeting and a prompted explanation of two concepts introduced in class for which they need to provide a comparison and rating. This assignment introduces students to electronic etiquette, as well as how to work and communicate with an instructor effectively by including the appropriate amount of detail in the email and by following directions for its content. This assignment also encompasses critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that use class content to provide a compare/contrast narrative as the message. It also offers them experiential learning.

- Textbook Journals and Reflections - Many of the assignments for the Managing Your Success class use journals to provide students with a scenario or case study. Students are asked to personalize the circumstances, apply the course concepts, and interact with one another through a discussion board. This engagement and interaction provides the course content in a meaningful way. However, more importantly, it does so in a way that is relevant and applicable to the students. They see the value of the information, they must imagine and conceptualize its use, and they have to develop a strategy to communicate their knowledge and understanding of the scenario, terminology, and application in their response. If the assignment is a discussion, students must also demonstrate how to read for detail, respond effectively to the concept presented, and respond with respect and good manners by addressing their fellow students by name.
- Credible and Reliable Information – Many of our assignments reinforce the value and use of support services such as the library. We all remember having to deal with the boredom of service presentations in our classes, which we basically ignored unless tested on the material. To demonstrate the practical use of the library, we have multiple activities where students interact with its website by emailing themselves a source they need and reviewing research guidelines. A personal favorite is where students compare two websites (one fake and one real) to really understand the quality of information on the internet and how to discern the good from the bad. Students use the “CRAAP Test” to evaluate the websites. (Information about the “CRAAP Test” can be found on YouTube and Google.) All of these activities cover the required content, while also reinforcing the soft skills of asking for help, communicating effectively, critical thinking, and problem solving. It also provides students with the opportunity to practice technological literacy.

It is really that simple. You don't need to reinvent the wheel or create a whole new curriculum. You don't have to reduce the time you spend on discipline-specific curriculum in order to specifically focus on 21st century skills. They are probably already there, like low hanging fruit, ready for the taking. Think about the assignments that you currently assign. What can you do with your current assignments to emphasize soft skill? Rather than just having students post a rote answer in the discussion board, how can you help them use more imagination, solve a problem, and effectively communicate and defend their perspectives to other students? How often do you create a situation where students can have a free-form debate and discussion in class about a topic that you are covering, outlining the pros and cons, whether they agree or disagree, or identifying what they feel are the

key points or details? When individuals feel like they are contributing, they feel validated and are much more likely to contribute in the future. That engagement reduces the apathy and behaviors that circumvent the work and learning.

Those are the soft skill behaviors that employers are looking for in potential employees. They want someone who can take an idea or problem, dissect it, and think about alternatives and optional solutions or workarounds, while at the same time considering who it will affect, how it will affect the “big picture,” and effectively communicate their position to other individuals. These are the 21st century skills that students need to learn and cultivate throughout their college career. If you really think about it, isn't that what education has been aiming to achieve for years?

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References

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