

## Our Students' Soft Skills Scarcity: Why Academics Affairs Should Lead the Effort

Our finest students stood nervously as our university's president sized them up during inspection. In a few moments, these students would meet the State Chancellor for Higher Education, the Oklahoma State University system president, a handful of State Regents, and other educational dignitaries. The students fidgeted and fussed with new professional clothes that bound and bunched. They straightened hemlines and neckties. They avoided eye contact and examined the tops of their shoes. Then the president asked the question that started everything.

"How's your handshake?" she queried one of the nervous young women. Our president wanted to know if the students understood how to shake hands properly. A few scared but honest students confessed that they did not. Several others pretended they knew what to do. However, it was quickly determined that none of these 30 honor students had been coached on how to shake hands in a professional situation. The president and other members of the administration who were present went around the room for the next ten minutes coaching the group. By the time the VIPs arrived, all of the students did a great job demonstrating their newfound soft skill.

While this story is unique to our institution, the lessons learned from it are not. This vignette became a central part of our administration's message over the course of the next several months. Faculty, staff, and administrators began to pay more attention to the soft skills that we used with each other and with our students. Of course, soft skills are abilities that are not technical in nature that help students be good citizens, employees, and people.

### That's Not My Job!

A general managerial axiom states that as organizations become more complex, they become increasingly specialized. Higher education is also governed by this principle. At most American colleges, specialization has been the trend for decades. The days when a talented faculty member got a bit of teaching load release to be the registrar or direct the library are long gone. In recent years, higher education has hired more and more non-teaching employees to perform functions that support instruction. Most universities and community colleges have career services, business and industry relations, and student services departments.

The intent of specialization is to serve students better. However, without robust communication and clear lines of responsibility, some important functions can fall through the cracks.

The complexity of today's jobs has also encouraged specialization in how we prepare students for those jobs. Universities across the country are cutting general education courses as a way to provide increased time for major courses and to reduce time to matriculation in the face of high college costs. However, as students develop a deeper understanding of their majors, they may be missing out on the skills that must be demonstrated in networking and interviews to land a job in the first place. Much of our technical specialization puts the cart before the horse. Students have to have soft skills or few employers will notice their hard skills. While specialized knowledge is important, great soft skills are often what provide students with a job offer. The responsibility for the sharpening of those skills belongs to every college employee. However, because the coordination of student instruction and strategic planning for student growth happens in academic affairs, this unit is primarily responsible for ensuring that each student has the requisite soft skills they need to be successful.

### What Are Soft Skills?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's (2012) Special Report, "Skills That Pay the Bills," there are six essential soft skills: communication, enthusiasm/attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving/critical thinking, and professionalism. Faculty members express considerable skepticism during conversations about adding soft skills to their classes. Some balk at the idea and others question how such a time-consuming effort fits into the already crowded structure of existing courses. Many faculty members feel that instructional time is already too scarce to effectively teach everything that they would like to cover. Consequently, these faculty members cannot envision an instructional world where they are able to add a robust exploration of complicated soft skills to the already considerable course content.

Other even more skeptical faculty members outright deride soft skills as the most recent "buzz word" making the rounds in higher education literature—a flash in the pan that will quickly fade away. Some faculty members recognize the importance of soft skills, but do not feel they have the necessary expertise to teach them. How can we help faculty embrace a comprehensive soft skills curriculum that provides students with an overarching framework that they understand? My answer: internal marketing.

Many administrations fail to recognize that each of the soft skills identified by the Department of Labor are components of work that faculty have been asking of students for years. The science professor who requires students to work in Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning groups on projects is teaching teamwork. The business professor who requires students to present their business plan to the class is teaching communication. The English professor who exposes students to controversial topics and helps to guide their response is teaching critical thinking. Indeed, most college classes reinforce, if not focus on, the development of one or more of these soft skills. However, faculty members do not look at these skills as a list of competencies that they are solely responsible for developing. Instead, faculty members view these skills as tools that students need to complete collegiate-level assignments and writings. While some of these soft skills are easily focused upon in a variety of different assignment formats, other skills like shaking hands, effectively interviewing, making eye contact, and portraying professionalism are not obviously curricular in nature.

If your students' hard skills are lacking, no amount of soft skills will help them keep their jobs. They might be able to use the soft skills to talk their way into an organization, but their hard skills, or lack of them, will determine how long they stay and how high they rise. Hard skills such as care plans, covalent bonds, calculating equations for math for engineering, and tactical room entry procedures for emergency response teams are all curricular. Conversations between administration and faculty with the businesses who employ our graduates help to place these important hard skills in context. If the hard skills have been acquired, academic leaders may hear commentary from stakeholders expressing that students know their technical information, but are seriously lacking in critical thinking or professionalism. Other stakeholders might say things like, "Your students and alumni can succeed at tasks if they are directed and provided significant oversight and structure." But students may not be arriving at their first jobs out of school with important soft skills that employers need to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy.

### How Can *Habits of Mind* Help?

Costa and Kallick's (2008) *Habits of Mind* provides 16 mental dispositions that help individuals grapple with complex problems. These habits provide the scaffolding upon which good critical thinking, teamwork, and professional behaviors can be built. The habits are deeply intellectual. Faculty members light up when talking about mental habits. They see this discussion as the bread and butter of what they hope to teach students. The *Habits of Mind* provides a framework to market the teaching of soft skills to academics. These 16 habits will help students finish their studies, embrace

lifelong learning, and become productive members of democratic society. To discuss mental habits is to embrace how college enriches and empowers students. For faculty, education is about better mental habits. Table 1.1 at the end of this article notes the relationships between Costa and Kallick's *Habits of Mind* and the Department of Labor's soft skills. The overlap is uncanny. The difference is perception. This gulf in perception can be spanned with marketing.

### What Does This Part Do?

Have you ever popped the hood of an automobile and been confused about what you saw? Automobiles function efficiently because all of the interconnected and inter-related parts are doing their assigned tasks. A curriculum is like an automobile. One part isolated from the rest is limited. Only when the parts are brought together to make a whole does the magic of engineering kick in and the automobile's form and function are made apparent. Faculty leaders and administrators have to pop the hood of the curriculum and determine where each of these soft skills should be taught. The leader of this process must be academic affairs. Like a good mechanic, academic affairs should know how each part will be impacted by changes to another part. Academic affairs has a view of how the whole curriculum flows. Using *Habits of Mind* provides academic affairs with a bridge to connect the needs of employers with an academically focused program.

It is easy to spot teamwork and critical thinking. Sure, communication is being taught in most classes. However, it may be surprising to learn that non-verbal communication (e.g., handshaking) is not taught on most campuses. It may be even more surprising to learn that students are required to take up to ten hours of science, but no hours in listening, interpersonal communication, or interviewing. As academic leaders, we have to determine where each of these soft skills should be embedded into the curriculum and ensure that they are being taught in the appropriate places with the appropriate opportunities for application and practice. While many soft skills are easily integrated into existing learning opportunities, where in the curriculum does handshaking belong? Which class teaches students how to write a professional email or a resume? This sounds easy, but be prepared for push back if you float the idea of changing or adding a general education requirement to teach the soft skills that don't easily fit into the traditional curriculum.

These efforts belong in academic affairs because we are responsible for making sure that our students represent our institutions well. Our students are our products, and our communities, especially employers, are our ultimate customers. We must accept responsibility for the soft skills shortcomings of our graduates and endeavor at every turn to coach and grow our students' soft skills. This will require

tremendous resolve and commitment. In a higher education landscape dominated by all things S.T.E.M., academic affairs must ensure that teaching our students soft skills is included in the curriculum. While it is important for students to possess technical knowledge and discipline-specific training, soft skills are the catalysts that enable students to put their technical skills to optimum use. Soft skills are often the tie-breakers that allow our alumni to join good organizations. Soft skills open doors for students. Hard skills keep those doors of opportunity open.

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**Table 1.1: Overlap between HOM and DOL Soft Skills**

<b>Costa &amp; Kallick's Habits:</b>	<b>Dept. of Labor List overlap:</b>
1. Persisting	Enthusiasm/Attitude
2. Managing Impulsivity	Professionalism
3. Listening with empathy	Communication
4. Thinking Flexibly	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking
5. Thinking about our Thinking	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking
6. Striving for Accuracy and Precision	
7. Questioning and Posing Problems	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking and Communication
8. Applying past knowledge to new Situations	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking
9. Thinking and Communicating with Clarity and Precision	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking and Communication
10. Gathering data through all the Senses	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking
11. Creating, Imagining, and Innovating	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking
12. Responding with Wonderment and Awe	Enthusiasm/Attitude
13. Taking Responsible Risks	Professionalism
14. Finding Humor	Enthusiasm/Attitude
15. Thinking Interdependently	Teamwork and Networking
16. Learning Continuously	Enthusiasm/Attitude