



The Career College Information Source

Soft Skills: The Foundation for Academic and Career Success

By Dennis Spisak, President, DJSpisak Consulting and Founding Partner, Ignite3E

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A few years ago I was involved in an advisory board meeting that included academic officers from approximately 12 career colleges from across the country. It was a very informative meeting, covering a variety of topics of interest to schools within the career college sector. The one session that stood out to me was on the value and importance of teaching soft skills in our schools. Everyone, without exception, expressed the value of teaching soft skills to our students for both academic and career success. Ironically, when asked how many schools had soft skills included in their curriculum, none of the participants spoke in the affirmative. The problem, as mentioned by the participants, was how to fit soft skills into the curriculum or even in individual courses. When you consider the importance of soft skills on academic and career success, I think we need to find a way to teach soft skills to our students versus dismissing doing so because it is

not easy to do within our existing curricula.

The mission of our schools has always been centered on job training. For the most part, we do an excellent job of providing our students with the skills needed to successfully perform the tasks in a particular job area in business, medical, trades, etc. Such skills are labeled *hard skills*. Our

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curricula are centered on *hard skills* and the majority of time is spent on teaching specific job related skills. However, studies show that job/career success is based on 75 percent soft skills and only 25 percent hard skills. We need to place a major emphasis on, and include, soft skills within our curricula if we are going to be successful in training our students for success in their chosen careers.

I place soft skills in two different categories with some overlapping.

First, we have soft skills that relate directly to success on the job. The second group of soft skills relates to academic success. These are skills such as study skills, listening skills, organization skills, and writing skills. Both sets of skills are essential to a student’s success in school and in their careers.

Two key areas by which our schools are judged are graduation rates and placement rates. We all know the

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emphasis placed on these two areas the last several years. In terms of placement, we need to determine what specific skills employers most want in their

employees. In November 2014, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) published a list of the *10 Skills Employers Most Want*. They are:

- Ability to work in a team

- Ability to make decisions and solve problems
- Ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside the organization
- Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work
- Ability to obtain and process information
- Ability to analyze quantitative data
- Technical knowledge related to the job
- Proficiency with computer software programs
- Ability to create and/or edit written reports
- Ability to sell and influence others

Note that there is only one skill in the list of 10 that is related to a specific job skill. All the others are soft skills. If we are concerned about placement and career success for our students then why are we not placing greater emphasis in our curricula to skills *wanted* by employers?

Another area to consider is the



DENNIS SPISAK began a 32-year career in publishing with McGraw-Hill in 1981, holding several management positions from field manager to Vice President of Sales/National Sales Manager for the Career Education Division of McGraw-Hill Higher Education. After

leaving McGraw-Hill in 2011, he served as senior consultant for Pearson Learning Solutions. In 2013 he started DJSpisak Consulting, which concentrates on the career college sector of postsecondary education. DJSpisak Consulting works with career colleges to enhance performance and outcome achievement. He also works with companies offering innovative digital learning tools that can benefit students in career colleges. In 2014, Dennis became a founding partner of Ignite3E, an automated system that measures faculty effectiveness based on attendance, retention, and student success and provides customized faculty training and development.

Dennis was named one of the “25 Most Influential People in the Career College Sector” by Career College Central magazine in 2008, and he was recognized as one of 25 who are “Making an Impact in Career Education” by Career College Central magazine in 2012. He served several terms as vice chairman of the executive board of the Imagine America Foundation and is a member of the Board of Trustees for Lincoln College of New England.

Dennis earned his bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in business education from Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, and he is a recognized national speaker on topics dealing with faculty development, retention, handling and embracing change, teaching methodology, the impact of technology on all aspects of the teaching/learning process, and more.

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reasons why people lose their jobs. There are a number of different sources for such data. I took the most commonly listed reasons from a variety of sources. They are:

- Absenteeism/lateness
- Unable to get along with others
- Unable to follow directions
- Unable to do assigned tasks
- Doing personal business at work
- Failure to take initiative
- Negative talk
- Laziness
- Attitude of entitlement
- Inability to adapt to change
- Unable to do assigned tasks
- Drug and alcohol abuse

All but two of these are soft skill areas. Employers cannot afford to hire and fire people. It's expensive to train new people only to let them go. They are becoming more-and-more careful and are really honing in on soft skills when interviewing. The following are a few of the questions from Targeted Selection, DDI that represent the types of questions commonly being asked during interviews to determine the interviewee's level of soft skills.

- How good are your listening skills? How do you know? (**Listening Skills**)
- How do you define doing a good job? (**Work Standards**)
- What are the highest-pressure situations you have been under in recent years? How did you cope? (**Stress Tolerance**)
- How do you stay attuned to potential problems? (**Analysis**)
- Have you ever done any group speaking? How did you prepare? (**Oral Communication**)
- Give an example of when you worked the hardest and felt the greatest sense of achievement. (**Job Motivation**)

With the competition that exists today for jobs, doesn't it make sense to have your students prepared to present themselves in a favorable light in terms of what employers feel are necessary qualities and skills to have a successful career with their company?

To this point, I've focused on soft skills essential to career success. What I believe is more important for our students are the soft skills

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that can positively impact their academic success and lead them to graduation. These would include:

- Note taking
- Time management
- Study skills
- Creative thinking
- Responsibility
- Communication
- Ability to follow directions
- Goal setting
- Problem-solving
- Questioning skills
- Comfort with technology
- Self-management
- Team work
- Selecting ideas from textbooks and presentations

When I give presentations, I often ask attendees in the session if their schools offer training on study skills to incoming students and how long is the training. Most schools do offer such training and the length of time I often hear ranges from one day, three days, or three weeks. That is better than nothing but I wonder how a student can learn study skills in one day or even three weeks when they didn't acquire such a skill in 12-years of schooling. In other words, students

need a concentrated, focused program to learn the soft skills that will provide them with the skills necessary to successfully complete their classwork. We can't simply pay lip service to such a critical need.

So how do we teach soft skills without negatively impacting the teaching of hard skills?

This can actually be done in a number of ways within the existing published curriculum. One option is to become innovative, like Cambria Rowe Business College (CRBC) in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. CRBC has revised their curriculum to place a major emphasis on soft skills. They elevated the importance of soft skills

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by placing the teaching of both career soft skills and academic soft skills at the beginning of the curriculum, before students begin to take courses in

their program of study. In 2012, the CRBC team created a curriculum that consisted of Core Competencies, EQ Curriculum, and Program Curriculum.

The Core Competencies consist of:

- **Microcomputer concepts** – An introductory computer course with emphasis on the fundamentals of Microsoft Word. Other topics include microcomputer hardware and operating systems. *6 Credits*
- **Introduction to writing** – An introduction to writing and composition is offered during this course. Topics include parts of speech and the formulation of proper sentences, paragraphs, and

introductory business messages. *6 Credits*

- **Application software skills** – This course prepares students to efficiently use Microsoft Office products, specifically Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint. *6 Credits*
- **Applied application software** – This advanced course covers all aspects of Microsoft Office through the completion of business simulated projects. *6 Credits*
- **Digital content creation** – This course focuses on using digital tools and social media to engage customers and drive business, and create a professional digital persona. Students will learn how to effectively use Web 2.0 tools such as social media blogs, podcasts, webinars and other tools to enhance any business or themselves. *6 Credits*

The EQ Curriculum consists of:

- **Communication skills** – This course covers basic written skills including punctuation and grammar, capitalization rules, and number expression. *6 Credits*
 - **Advanced communication skills** – This course covers advanced written skills including memo and letter writing; listening skills; feedback; nonverbal communication; and an introduction to public speaking. *6 Credits*
 - **Research/information literacy** – Students learn how to determine the nature and extent of information needed to solve a problem, how to access the information effectively, how to evaluate the information found, how to use the information for a specific purpose, and
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how to effectively and legally communicate the information. In addition, students will learn how to present the information orally.
6 Credits

- **College success skills** – This is the initial course for every student starting at Cambria-Rowe Business College. This course is designed to give everyone the skills they need to be a successful student at the College. Topics include learning styles, study skills, basic interpersonal skills and conflict management, financial literacy, basic technology skills, EQ skills, listening skills, stress management, and career development. *6 Credits*
- **Interpersonal skills/collaboration** – Students learn how to build productive relationships for any situation by mastering the skills necessary for personal and organizational effectiveness such as self-management, communication, teamwork, collaboration, and problem-solving. *6 Credits*
- **Career development strategies** – This course provides instruction that is instrumental in obtaining employment and career advancement. The focus of the course is on the EQ skills required by employers. Additional topics include resumes, cover letters, interviews, and career development. *6 Credits*

Every student in their first term takes the College Success Skills, Introduction to Writing, and Microcomputer Concepts courses, providing each student with a solid EQ and Core foundation that will continue to be developed throughout their initial terms of enrollment with

the additional Core and EQ courses.

Because of what they experienced at the beginning of the curriculum, students have a good foundation to build upon toward their academic success. In addition, they have a strong foundation that will prove valuable when they seek their first position and will benefit them throughout their career. Western Pennsylvania is highly competitive in terms of employment. The curriculum utilized by Cambria Rowe Business College certainly gives their graduates an advantage over other applicants as they seek employment in the job market.

How can we implement soft skills in our existing curriculum if we choose not to alter our curriculum?

To successfully implement the teaching of soft skills throughout your curriculum it must be a priority to your entire school. Administration and faculty members must be onboard and must understand the value of soft skills, not only to the student's academic and career success, but also to retention, student success, and placement. This can be accomplished by choosing an administrator or faculty member to take a leadership role in the initiative. This should be an individual who understands the value of soft skills and a person that has a passion for teaching soft skills. This individual needs to develop a strategy for teaching and implementing soft skills throughout the school day, both inside and outside the classroom. There are certain areas that need to

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be a priority in the initiative and are ones that must be considered and implemented by both administration and faculty. Ironically, these are things that are normally exhibited in our schools by our faculty and administration. There are also things that we take for granted and may not realize the positive implications they may have on our student's success. A few examples:

- **Exhibit and demonstrate a positive attitude** – To begin generating a positive attitude within our students is to demonstrate a positive attitude ourselves. One very simple way to do this is to smile and provide a friendly greeting when passing our students in the hallway, as they enter our classroom, or as they are leaving for the day. This may seem like a very inconsequential thing to do, and it is, **but the power of it** can be profound to the student. Keep in mind that the most safe, secure, enjoyable, happy moment of each day for many of our students may be those spent in your school or your classroom. Being around people who are positive will generate a positive attitude in our students. To some students this may be an entirely new environment for them.
 - **Everyone is a role model** – Do our students have role models? Some may and some may have role models that will not be beneficial in terms of their academic and career success. Faculty and administration are in an excellent position to model behavior that will prove beneficial to our students in these two areas. This can be done as easy as having students observe our dress and how we interact with our peers, our students, and everyone associated with the school.
 - **Demonstrate organizational skills** – How lessons are planned. How activities flow within the classroom. How community events, such as blood drives are organized. How the classroom is organized. These all can be a learning experience for students who need to develop their own organizational skills.
 - **Demonstrate time management** – Planning activities within the classroom in a timely manner. Being on time for class and other school events. Returning texts and quizzes in a timely manner. Students will notice and think twice about being late for class when they know their instructors respect the value of time.
 - **Demonstrate flexibility and adaptability** – Computers don't always work. Software programs freeze. Class is interrupted for one reason or another. Classes are left out early due to a major snowstorm. These are excellent opportunities to demonstrate flexibility and adaptability. We've all been there!
 - **Demonstrate strong communication skills** – Directions for tests written in a concise and clear manner. Classroom presentations are delivered in a logical and precise manner. Responses to questions are thought out and delivered in concise manner.
 - **Demonstrate listening skills** – Looking in the eyes of the person who is speaking to you. Allow body language to indicate you are hearing what is being said. Acknowledge and communicate in
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a timely and appropriate manner. In today's world, it is easy to be multitasking when someone is speaking to you. Looking at a smartphone, looking at someone else or scanning the area around you can be most annoying to someone that is trying to speak with someone else.

To set the tone and importance of a soft skills initiative means that time must be devoted to it when appropriate. For example, it should be on the program for faculty meetings. The leader of the initiative should have time on the program to discuss progress being made, hear suggestions on ways to improve the initiative, and discuss successes achieved. This also develops a team spirit where everyone in the school has a role and share in achievements gained.

Teaching soft skills in the classroom setting is equally as doable for an instructor. Within the list of soft skills previously mentioned are subsets of soft skills. Being courteous and exhibiting good manners are two within this subset. Expect students to exhibit good manners and be courteous to instructors and their peers. When such behaviors are not exhibited in a given situation, the student needs to be told that such behavior is not acceptable.

Respecting fellow students leads to the development of other soft skills within our students. Developing teamwork within the classroom is essential for what is expected today in the workplace. Respecting the viewpoints of others, assisting others in achievement of a common goal or negotiating a solution to a common disagreement are areas of note in the workplace of today.

An easy way to teach teamwork is to have students work in small groups. From such an activity, students not only learn what it means to work as a team but also they have the opportunity to learn negotiating skills, listening skills, respect for others, communication skills, flexibility and adaptability, leadership, and conflict management.

The following are a few suggestions for teaching other soft skills within the classroom.

- **Communication skills –**

- Show the importance of good communication skills and the negative impact incorrect communication can generate.

- Mistakes from major newspapers: *Officer convicted of accepting bribe.* (Bride should be *bribe*. One letter wrong changes the entire meaning of the sentence.)

- Mistakes from church announcements: *Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 P.M. Please use the back door.*

- Role-play situations within the discipline allow students the opportunity to speak in front of a small group, think on their feet, and accept constructive criticism if critiqued.

- Have students write short summaries or reports on a given topic. Have random students read their summary out loud to the class followed by discussion.

- **Critical thinking and creativity skills:** I've always been amazed at the creativity and curiosity preschoolers possess. When they color they may have a pink sky on a picture or a yellow dog. When they draw a picture of their house, it will have trees in front, maybe

even a lake in the back, with a barn on the side. In actuality it may not look anything like their house. Have you noticed how preschoolers will ask a million questions about one event? They may be watching a movie when they ask you over and over what is going to happen next. Or they may question you on how Santa Claus can really visit every house in the world in one evening or how can chubby Santa Claus fit down our narrow chimney? I'm also amazed at how quickly they lose their creativity and curiosity once they start school. They learn the sky is blue and never pink. If it's pink, it's wrong. There is a standard way of solving a math problem. There are rules to follow and consequences if rules are broken. After a couple of years, they realize that there is no way one person can visit every house in the world in one evening so there is no Santa Claus. Unknowingly and unintentionally, we stifle creativity and thinking outside the box in the early years of school. The following are a couple suggestions on assisting students in retrieving these skills.

- Provide them the opportunity to look at situations through different color lenses.
 - Ask thought provoking, fun types of questions to stimulate discussion:
 - Did cavemen have a sense of humor? If so, what made them laugh?
 - Why does pizza come in a square box?
 - Why are you IN a movie but ON TV?
 - Pose a serious question to the class that deals with their specific field of study.

For example, you work in a clinic that provides services for AIDS patients. As you are leaving work one day, you see your neighbor walking toward the entrance from the parking lot. Do you pretend you don't notice him and walk on by? Do you go back into the building and wait until he passes you? Do you greet him with a friendly hello and ask him how he is doing? Each response has its own consequences and all responses should be followed with another question.

- Place something like the following on the board and ask students what it says. This will force them to think in a manner different from how they normally think. A few of these each week will begin to condition their thinking process beyond how they normally think.

MAN

BOARD

Answer: Man Overboard

- **Accountability and responsibility**
 - We've all had students that came to class without their homework complete. We do them a disservice if we let it slide or give them another opportunity to provide it for us. If the student tells you the dog ate the homework, then the student needs to be told the dog needs to be responsible for his actions and accept the consequences for it. The dog may have eaten the homework but the homework

was the responsibility of the student and the student needs to be held accountable. Employers do not want to hear excuses for something not being done. Employers expect results.

- When a student earns a lower grade than acceptable on a test, ask the student what they could have done differently in preparing for the test. Work with them and have the student determine what they need to do in the future to improve their test scores.
- **Study Skills**
 - If a textbook is used in the course, take a moment and show students how the book is designed to aid them in the learning process. For example:
 - New technical terms are in bold print or highlighted.
 - Important concepts are highlighted in most cases.
 - Summaries of important points are in the margins of each page in most cases.
 - Illustrations are designed to visually explain a concept. They need to be studied.
- When going over the results of a test, ask a few students in class what they could have done differently in studying for their test? Generate a discussion, which will generate a number of ways to study for a test. Ask individuals in the class which of the ideas mentioned were they going to implement in studying for the next text. Keep in mind, many of

our students never thought about different ways to study for a test. Their peers are now providing them with many different options.

I mentioned previously that development of soft skills in our students could aid in retention efforts. If we develop student's skills early in their program that will enable them to be successful, they will be successful.

Understanding the need to persevere to achieve a goal, knowing that they are responsible

for their achievements and failures, understanding the process of studying for a test, the importance of listening and note taking skills on their classroom success, the power of teamwork and the support generated from working with others, all contribute to providing the confidence a student needs to be successful in their goal to graduate from college.

For a college to be successful in teaching soft skills it must be done in every classroom on everyday. Everyone working with students must make it a priority on every opportunity. Placing emphasis on soft skills within a college is a **win-win** for all!

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