

## Direct Instruction and Assessment of Personal and Professional Skills Across Disciplines: Faculty Perspectives

Laura Saunders  
*Simmons University*

Stephen Bajjaly  
*Wayne State University*

Employers value soft skills and often report a “skills gap,” resulting in calls on higher education to teach these skills more widely. However, few studies have examined faculty perspectives on soft skills. The researchers conducted a nationwide survey of faculty in the fields of business, education, engineering, library science, nursing, and social work to explore whether and how they are teaching soft skills. Most faculty believe soft skills are important and are integrating them into their courses, although there are variations by discipline. Methods for teaching soft skills are varied, but “passive” approaches like readings and lectures are most prominent. The results have implications for curriculum development and will be of interest to faculty across these disciplines as well as employers in the associated industries.

Soft skills, or inter- and intrapersonal skills and qualities such as communication, customer service, flexibility, and critical thinking, transfer across industries and positions, in contrast with the domain-specific knowledge and skills associated with, and often unique to, a discipline or field. Soft skills are highly valued by employers across fields and professions and certain personal and professional skills have been linked with academic success, making them critical for college students to develop. Employers often report a “skills gap” in this area, prompting them to lament a disconnect between higher education curricula and the needs of the field. However, most studies focus solely on employer needs, while fewer studies have examined faculty perspectives on personal and professional skills. Similarly, much of the literature in higher education offers suggestions for faculty to address soft skills without exploring whether faculty are already teaching these skills.

This study begins to address the gap in the literature. The researchers surveyed faculty across the United States in the six fields of business, education, engineering, library science, nursing, and social work to explore how they are teaching and assessing students in soft skills. Specifically, this study examined the following questions: (a) How important do faculty believe soft skills are to student success in their fields?; (b) Do faculty believe they are responsible for teaching these skills?; and (c) To what extent do they integrate instruction and assessment of these skills into their curricula, and what methods of instruction do they use? The results have implications for curriculum development and will be of interest to faculty across these disciplines.

### Literature Review

Higher education in the United States has long tried to balance education for citizenry and education for the marketplace (Martin, 2019). Of course, these two goals

are not mutually exclusive. Competencies, like critical thinking and global perspective, and soft skills, such as communication, service orientation, and the ability to work across cultures, seem to span both of these goals. Employers place a high value on personal and professional skills and those skills are also identified as crucial to lifelong learning and general success, making them valuable for both responsible citizenship and for workplace success. As Gibb (2014) puts it, personal and professional skills “enable and enhance three things that are believed to be closely interconnected: personal development, participation in learning, and success in employment” (p. 456), making them relevant across higher education curricula.

As the cost of tuition continues to rise, along with stakeholder demands for accountability, more emphasis has been placed on metrics related to employment upon graduation (Murakami, 2020; Palmer, 2015; Protopsaltis, 2019). Multiple studies and reports show that employers value and seek a range of personal and professional skills (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015; Hart Research Associates, 2018; Kukkonen, Leino, Koskinen, Salminen, & Strandell Laine, 2020; Linked-in Learning, 2018; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018; Turner, 2019). While the specific mix of skills may vary, the findings span sectors, including highly technical industries (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015; Craig, 2019).

However, employers also report a “skills gap” or difficulty finding job candidates with soft skills such as communication, customer service, problem-solving, flexibility, and critical thinking (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015; Robles, 2012; Somerville, 2019; Vista, 2020). These studies have implications for higher education faculty, but while the reports tend to include recommendations for higher education, they generally gather data only from employers, and rarely include faculty perspectives.

The importance of personal and professional skills is not limited to the workplace. Soft skills associated

with emotional intelligence have been linked to better academic performance (Berenson, Boyles & Weaver, 2008; Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteché, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2009; MacCann, Jiang, Brown, Double, Bucich, & Minbashian, 2020), including in online environments (Abe, 2020). Skills associated with metacognition, reflective practice, and self-regulation are also considered essential to life-long learning and personal fulfillment (Di Pardo Léon-Henri, 2019; Gibb, 2014). A number of educators have also emphasized the importance of certain personal and professional skills to the overarching goals of "citizenship" and "global citizenship" (Díez-Gutiérrez & Díaz-Nafria, 2018; Jarkiewicz, 2020), with Islam (2019) asserting that "intercultural communicative competence, digital literacy and soft skills are the main required competencies and skills for students" (p. 203).

Many professional associations and researchers recommend reprioritizing curricula to include greater emphasis on soft skills (Rebele & St. Pierre, 2019; Tseng, Yi, & Yeh, 2019; Turner, 2019), and some have proposed frameworks or models for addressing specific sets of skills (see e.g., Botelho & Lima, 2020; Islam 2019; Price, Gilkerson, & Barry, 2018). A few studies have gathered faculty perspectives on the role of personal and professional skills (Benbow & Hora, 2016; Mitchell, 2008) or offered strategies for teaching and assessing soft skills (Ingols & Shapiro, 2014; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2019). Some research has indicated that explicit training and assessment can improve personal and professional skills (Developing Soft Skills in Higher Education, 2003; Edwards, 2018; Price et al., 2018), and Gibb (2014) argues for more systematic instruction and assessment of these skills based on a research-informed agenda. However, most of these studies relied on limited samples and have not explored whether faculty are teaching these skills.

While a few case studies report on faculty efforts to teach personal and professional skills (Anthony & Garner, 2016; Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; Gibb, 2014; Jones, 2020; Robinson & Stubberud, 2014; Singh & Vorbach, 2017; Valenzuela, 2020), it remains unclear how widespread these efforts are, and whether they involve the direct, active instruction, and specific feedback. As Martin (2019) notes, "there seems to be broad consensus that soft skills development should take place before students graduate, but there is a lack of consensus as to how or where" (p. 49) these skills should be addressed. He criticizes the "sporadic, non-continuous developmental events" (p. 50) that characterize most approaches to personal and professional skills training.

## Method

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty perspectives on soft skills across disciplines, including whether and how faculty are addressing and assessing those skills in their courses. Specifically, the study focused on the following questions:

1. How important do faculty believe personal and professional skills to be for graduates of their program?
2. Do faculty feel responsible for teaching personal and professional skills?
3. Do faculty provide direct instruction on specific personal and professional skills in their courses? If so,
  - a. What methods do they use to teach these skills?
  - b. Do they provide students with feedback on these skills?
4. Are there differences across modalities, faculty ranks, or disciplines as to whether faculty teach personal and professional skills?

As noted in the literature review, emphasis on personal and professional skills cuts across industries and fields. Indeed, one of the characteristics of these skills is that they are considered transferable in that they can be applied in different settings, positions, and job functions. The researchers were interested in exploring faculty perspectives across several disciplines to better understand disciplinary perspectives on soft skills and soft skills instruction. The study focuses on professional programs, as these tend to have a close connection to the fields and faculty may feel an impetus to respond to the perceived skills gap and the stated needs of their graduates' employers.

Because the intention of the study was to develop a baseline of understanding of faculty perspectives on soft skills, and draw comparisons across fields, a large sample was needed. A survey offers the ability to reach a wider audience than qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups. A larger sample size allows the possibility of generalizing results, making it an appropriate tool for this study (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Between January and March of 2020, the researchers distributed the survey to a sample of between 2,000 and 3,000 faculty each in the fields of business, education, engineering, library science, nursing, and social work, for a total of 15,890 invitations. These programs were chosen as offering a range of perspectives, including fields that are more high-tech and those that are more "high-touch." Faculty information was collected using a Google Chrome extension to extract emails from the publicly available directories on selected institution's websites. The survey was distributed through Qualtrics. An initial email explained the purpose of the research and confirmed that the researchers had obtained IRB approval. Three days later another email provided a link to the survey. Two follow-

up emails were sent to non-respondents at two-week intervals to increase response rates.

A single definitive list of soft skills does not exist, and different studies focus on different competencies. However, certain skills and abilities are mentioned repeatedly across studies and fields. This survey centered on ten of these personal and professional skills: (a) interpersonal skills; (b) writing; (c) communication skills; (d) teamwork; (e) cultural competence (the ability to effectively communicate and interact across cultures); (f) reflective practice; (g) customer service skills; (h) commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; (i) adaptability/flexibility; and (j) presentation skills. Several methods were used to identify this set of skills, including literature reviews and previous research by one of the authors (Saunders, 2015; Saunders, 2019). This set of skills includes some of the more generic skills that have been identified as important across studies and fields. Other skills, like cultural competence and reflective practice, have been studied extensively in health care fields but have received less attention in the broader literature. Nevertheless, national events like the Black Lives Matter protests suggest these skills will become more widely recognized and thus they were included here.

The first section of the survey consisted of a set of matrix questions, asking faculty to rate the importance of each skill to their students' success in the fields. The next set of questions asked to what extent faculty believed they had a responsibility for teaching each of the skills. In the following section, faculty were asked if they provided direct instruction for each of the skills. If they answered yes, they were asked to indicate what methods they used to teach those skills, and whether they provided students with specific feedback on those skills. Respondents were provided a list of teaching methods, as well as an option to specify additional methods not listed. A final, open-ended question asked faculty to list any skills not mentioned that they believed to be important, and to describe how they addressed those skills. The survey concluded with demographic and background questions, including rank, number of years as a faculty member, whether they primarily taught bachelor or master-level courses, in what modality they primarily teach, and their experience with credit-bearing courses or professional development training related to teaching and learning.

The closed-ended questions were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Total percentages were gathered for each response. Crosstabs were used to test for statistically significant differences, for instance across fields, rank, and modality of instruction. Responses to open-ended questions were relatively brief and were analyzed for any commonalities in additional teaching strategies or additional skills.

## Findings

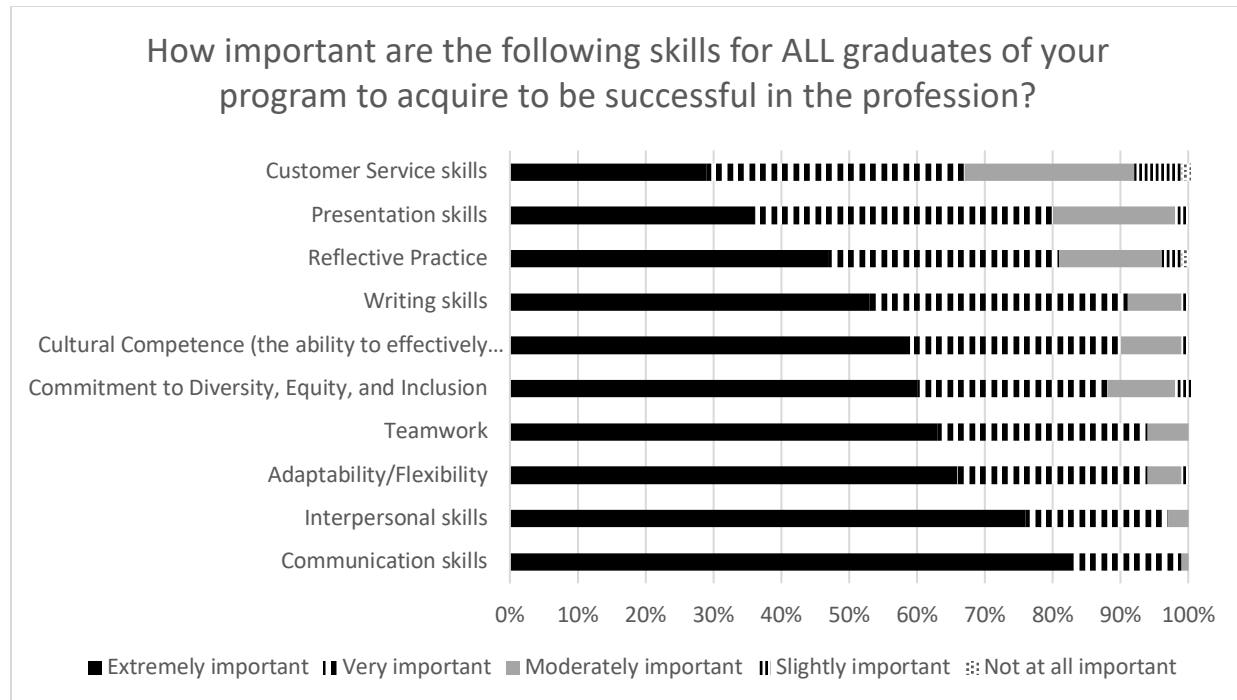
Identical surveys were distributed separately to between 2,000 and 3,000 faculty in the six fields of business, education, engineering, library and information science, nursing, and social work between January and March of 2020. In total, 1,210 responses were returned for a response rate of 7.6%. Engineering had the lowest response rate, at 4.2%, and library science the highest at 13.6%. The number of respondents were relatively even across the fields. The largest percentage of respondents (25%) came from education, followed by social work (19%), nursing (16%), library and information science (15%), business (14%), and engineering (11%). Most respondents have been faculty members for 5 or fewer years (33%) or more than 15 years (33%). The largest group of respondents were full-time contract faculty (34%). The vast majority indicated that they teach courses primarily face-to-face (67%), with the rest split fairly evenly between teaching primarily online (15%) or about equally online and face-to-face (18%). Most teach primarily at the master's level (48%), or equally at the master's and bachelor's level (32%). Half of respondents indicated that they had taken a credit-bearing course on teaching and learning, and 77% say they regularly or occasionally attend professional development activities focused on teaching and learning.

Most respondents rate all 10 personal and professional skills as at least moderately important. More than half rated 7 of 10 skills as extremely important for all graduates: communication skills (83%), interpersonal skills (76%), adaptability/flexibility (66%), teamwork (63%), commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (63%), cultural competence (59%), and writing skills (53%). Customer services was the lowest ranked skill, with only 29% rating it as extremely important. Figure 1 shows the ranking for all ten skills.

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they believe faculty are responsible for teaching these skills. More than 50% of respondents strongly agreed that faculty are responsible for teaching seven of the ten skills at the bachelor's level, and nine of the ten skills at the master's level. At the master's level, customer service was the only skill that a majority of respondents did not strongly agree faculty should teach. At the bachelor's level, fewer than 50% strongly agreed that faculty are responsible for teaching customer service, reflective practice, or presentation skills. Figure 2 shows the percentage of breakdown of respondents who strongly agreed that faculty should teach these skills at each level.

More than half of respondents indicated that they provide direct instruction in each of the ten skills in one or more of their courses. Teamwork was the mostly widely addressed skill, with 84% of respondents saying

**Figure 1**  
*Importance Ranking of Soft Skills*



they provide direct instruction in this skill, and customer service was the lowest at 60%. At least half of respondents who indicate that they provide direct instruction in a skill also say that they provide feedback to students on that skill. Teaching methods varied somewhat by skill, but discussions and instructor lectures were among the most popular methods. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the percentage of respondents who indicate that they taught each skill, the percent that provide feedback on that skill, and the top methods for instruction of that skill.

### Significant Differences

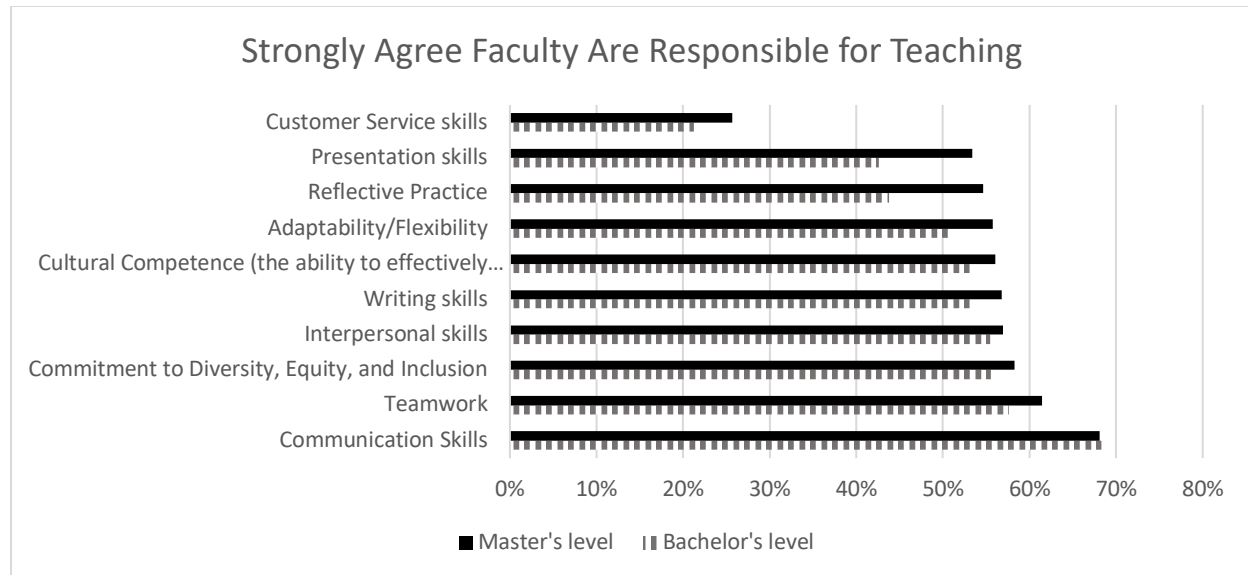
The researchers tested for statistically significant differences across fields, modalities, or faculty demographics using crosstabs with a significance level of 0.05. The greatest number of significant differences for direction were by field. For instance, there was a statistically significant difference for interpersonal skills ( $p=0.000$ ) with nursing faculty being most likely to teach these skills (71.4%) and engineering faculty least likely (40.2%). Engineering faculty are mostly likely to teach teamwork (93%), while library science faculty are least likely (63.5%). Table 2 shows the results of the chi-square test for statistical significance by field.

There were also some differences in instruction by level. Faculty teaching at both the master's and bachelor level were more likely to teach flexibility/adaptability

than those teaching primarily at the master's level ( $p=0.000004$ ). Faculty teaching primarily at the master's level were somewhat less likely than others to teach customer service skills ( $p=0.004$ ) and teamwork ( $p=0.004$ ). The majority of faculty who provide instruction also provide feedback on those skills. Only three skills showed a statistically significant difference by field in whether faculty provided feedback: (a) commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion ( $p=0.008$ ), (b) cultural competence ( $p=0.020$ ), and (c) writing ( $p=0.00001$ ). In addition, there were statistically significant differences by modality in whether faculty provided direct instruction for cultural competence ( $p=0.025$ ), teamwork ( $p=0.023$ ), and flexibility/adaptability ( $p=0.0001$ ). In general, those faculty who identified as teaching primarily online seemed less likely to provide instruction in these skills than those who teach primarily face-to-face. Finally, faculty who had taken a credit-bearing course in teaching and learning were more likely to teach interpersonal skills ( $p=0.0004$ ) and cultural competence ( $p=0.002$ ).

### Additional Skills Identified

The survey ended with an open-ended question asking respondents to discuss any other personal and professional skills not addressed in the survey. Fifty-eight participants responded to this question. The responses were generally quite brief, and many people

**Figure 2***Level of Agreement that Faculty are Responsible for Teaching Soft Skills*

used the space to clarify earlier answers or offer additional comments. Most of these additional skills were only mentioned by one or two respondents and did not constitute a pattern, but three skill areas did emerge as important from the open-ended responses. Fourteen respondents discussed the importance of broad professional skills such as professional writing (e.g., memos, business emails, resumes, and cover letters), the ability to manage themselves and their work (e.g., timeliness, attention to detail, and managing health issues), and understanding the work environment (e.g., “professionalism” and expectations of the workplace, managing up, and office politics). Eleven respondents highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence, including developing empathy, active listening, patience, and understanding. Finally, four respondents discussed the need to be able to manage conflict in the workplace.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations. Surveys always run the risk of responder bias which can skew the results. For instance, faculty who teach soft skills might have been more likely to respond to this survey. The risk of responder bias is compounded when response rates are low, as they were in this study. As such, care must be taken in generalizing the results.

While the ten skills chosen for this study were culled from previous research, they are not comprehensive, and it is possible that different skills might have resonated more with some fields. Further, semantics are important. The researchers used the same wording across surveys,

but in some cases the terms chosen might not have fit the fields surveyed. For instance, researchers chose the term “customer service” to describe the kind of service orientation that might be expected in any public-facing position in any field. However, some respondents, especially in nursing and social work, indicated that they favor different language as they do not think of their patients or clients as “customers.” These differences in language might have impacted some responses.

### Discussion

The results of this study show that a majority of faculty are teaching a range of personal and professional skills and, when they teach those skills, they tend to provide students with feedback. The vast majority of faculty view personal and professional skills as important, and feel at least some responsibility for teaching those skills, which aligns with previous research (Benbow & Hora, 2016). Faculty are more likely to teach certain skills in a face-to-face rather than an online environment, and master’s level faculty are less likely to teach certain skills, but these instances are limited. In fact, given the necessity of pivoting to online courses in the wake of the pandemic in spring 2020, it is reassuring to know that faculty are generally attempting to deliver equivalent experiences online and face-to-face. The differences across fields are somewhat more pronounced.

In addition to determining whether faculty teach soft skills, this study explored how they teach those skills. Lectures, readings, and discussions were the most common approaches across skills. However, faculty also

**Table 1**  
*Direct Instruction, Feedback, and Top Teaching Methods*

| Skill                    | % Direct instruction | % Giving feedback | Top teaching methods  |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---|
| Teamwork                 | 84                   | 88                | Group projects (19%)<br>Discussion (15%)<br>Instructor lecture (11%)  |
| Flexibility/adaptability | 80                   | 54                | Discussions (21%)<br>Instructor lecture (17%)<br>Readings (13%)<br>Writing assignments (10%)<br>Hands-on activity (10%) |
| Cultural competence      | 76                   | 73                | Discussions (17%)<br>Readings (16%)<br>Instructor lecture (12%)<br>Writing assignment (10%)                             |
| Commitment to DE&I       | 75                   | 73                | Discussion (17%)<br>Readings (15%)<br>Instructor lecture (14%)<br>Writing assignment (11%)                              |
| Communication            | 75                   | 95                | Discussion (15%)<br>Instructor lecture (13%)<br>Student presentation (12%)<br>Group project (11%)                       |
| Reflective practice      | 72                   | 87                | Writing assignments (19%)<br>Discussions (18%)<br>Instructor lecture (13%)<br>Readings (11%)                            |
| Presentation skills      | 70                   | 97                | Student presentations (21%)<br>Instructor lecture (16%)<br>Group project (13%)<br>Discussions (12%)                     |
| Writing                  | 68                   | 98                | Writing assignments (22%)<br>Instructor lecture (13%)<br>Discussion (12%)<br>Readings (11%)                             |
| Interpersonal            | 61                   | 84                | Discussion (15%)<br>Instructor-led lecture (12%)<br>Group work (10%)  |
| Customer service         | 60                   | 76                | Discussions (19%)<br>Instructor lecture (17%)<br>Readings (14%)   |

**Table 2**  
*Percentage of Faculty Providing Explicit Instruction (No, Yes) in Specific Soft Skills*

|   |     | Faculty Members' Field of Discipline |           |             |                 |         |             | Total |
|---|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|---------|-------------|-------|
|   |     | Business                             | Education | Engineering | Library Science | Nursing | Social Work |       |
| Interpersonal Skills<br>(n = 1,037)                       | No  | 46.6                                 | 41.8      | 59.8        | 38.4            | 28.6    | 29.1        | 39.3  |
|   | Yes | 53.4                                 | 58.2      | 40.2        | 61.6            | 71.4    | 70.9        | 60.7  |
| Writing Skills<br>(n = 1,032)                             | No  | 43.6                                 | 27.4      | 32.0        | 32.7            | 32.5    | 27.5        | 31.7  |
|   | Yes | 56.4                                 | 72.6      | 68.0        | 67.3            | 67.5    | 72.5        | 68.3  |
| Communication Skills<br>(n = 1,010)                       | No  | 30.8                                 | 26.5      | 24.7        | 25.4            | 17.5    | 22.6        | 24.7  |
|   | Yes | 69.2                                 | 73.5      | 75.3        | 74.6            | 82.5    | 77.4        | 75.3  |
| Flexibility / Adaptability<br>(n = 603)                   | No  | 4.7                                  | 9.3       | 2.9         | 62.8            | 11.7    | 13.5        | 20.1  |
|   | Yes | 95.3                                 | 90.7      | 97.1        | 37.2            | 88.3    | 86.5        | 79.9  |
| Presentation Skills<br>(n = 657)                          | No  | 50.0                                 | 29.7      | 56.5        | 28.2            | 27.4    | 25.9        | 30.3  |
|   | Yes | 50.0                                 | 70.3      | 43.5        | 71.8            | 72.6    | 74.1        | 69.7  |
| Commitment to Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion<br>(n = 374) | No  | 25.0                                 | 26.0      | 28.6        | 27.6            | 20.6    | 11.9        | 24.1  |
|   | Yes | 75.0                                 | 74.0      | 71.4        | 72.4            | 79.4    | 88.1        | 75.9  |
| Teamwork Skills<br>(n = 811)                              | No  | 9.6                                  | 10.7      | 7.0         | 36.5            | 7.7     | 10.3        | 16.0  |
|   | Yes | 90.4                                 | 89.3      | 93.0        | 63.5            | 92.3    | 89.7        | 84.0  |
| Reflective Practice<br>(n = 653)                          | No  | 45.7                                 | 25.2      | 37.5        | 37.7            | 25.0    | 14.6        | 27.9  |
|   | Yes | 54.3                                 | 74.8      | 62.5        | 62.3            | 75.0    | 85.4        | 72.1  |
| Cultural Competence<br>(n = 690)                          | No  | 19.2                                 | 22.4      | 17.9        | 38.9            | 14.2    | 15.9        | 23.8  |
|   | Yes | 80.8                                 | 77.6      | 82.1        | 61.1            | 85.8    | 84.1        | 76.2  |
| Customer Service Skills<br>(n = 650)                      | No  | 32.7                                 | 25.5      | 28.6        | 68.3            | 28.0    | 31.8        | 40.0  |
|   | Yes | 67.3                                 | 74.5      | 71.4        | 31.7            | 72.0    | 68.2        | 60.0  |

indicated using other approaches, some of which align well with the skill in question. For instance, writing assignments are the top strategy for teaching writing skills, with 22% of respondents indicating they use this approach. Writing assignments were also the top choice for teaching reflective practice (19%). Group projects were the most common strategy for teaching teamwork (19%), and student presentations were the top choice for teaching presentation skills (21%). Although not the top-ranked strategy, faculty reported using hands-on activities to teach flexibility/adaptability, and group work or group projects for communication, interpersonal, and presentation skills.

Write-in responses were relatively limited, but some respondents mentioned additional teaching strategies. For example, some faculty reported using field visits, service learning, and conferences to teach cultural competence; portfolios and journals and other reflective writing assignments to teach reflective practice; service-learning projects to teach a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and simulations and peer critiques for teaching teamwork. Thus, in at least some cases faculty are varying methods and including active learning.

Respondents identified three additional skills or skill groups they consider important in open-ended responses. Professionalism was the most common, identified by 14 respondents. This skill set included specific writing skills, such as the ability to write an appropriate memo, email or cover letter; a general understanding of the workplace and organizational politics; and self-regulation skills, such as timeliness, attention to detail, and the ability to manage one's own health issues. One respondent expressed a need for "more emphasis on professional skills such as applying for jobs, creating resumes and cover letters, interviewing, expectations of the professional environment." This respondent did not necessarily believe faculty had to teach these skills, but believed students should be exposed to them, explaining, "I don't think these can all happen in the classroom, but should be provided for everyone in the School." Assumedly, some of these skills would be addressed through extra-curricular and support offices like career services. Conflict resolution was mentioned by four respondents, and these could perhaps be folded into professionalism and self-regulation as well.

Finally, 11 respondents discussed the importance of empathy and emotional intelligence, which aligns with other studies and literature that have identified areas such as self-motivation and the ability to work independently (Hart Research Associates, 2018); socio-emotional and self-regulation (Benbow & Hora, 2016); and listening and building relationships (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015; Crawford & Fink, 2019) as important. Some respondents indicated that they are actively teaching

these skills. For example, one participant wrote, "Empathy and active listening are both critical personal and professional skills for today's graduates. I address these skills through class lectures, assignments, and class discussions."

Overall, the results of this study suggest faculty are aware of the importance of soft skills and take responsibility to teach these skills, which seems to contradict reports identifying a skills gap between employer expectations for soft skills. These studies often imply that faculty are not teaching these skills, and often end calling on colleges and universities to do more to prepare students. If faculty are teaching soft skills, it begs the question of why employers continue to identify a skills gap in potential hires.

One answer might lie in the differences in the extent to which certain skills are taught in each field. For instance, engineering faculty were significantly less likely to teach interpersonal and presentation skills, and business faculty were significantly less likely to teach writing and reflective practice. And, as noted, this study focused on only ten out of dozens of potentially important skills. Thus, although faculty are teaching a range of soft skills, there might be a disconnect between the skills being taught in the classroom and the specific skills sought in the field.

Nevertheless, more than half of faculty in each field report teaching most of these skills, suggesting some other factors might contribute to the perceived skills gap. One possibility is that students are exposed to these skills in the classroom, but they are not successfully transferring them to the workplace. Research suggests that active learning techniques, such as problem-based learning, can improve student learning and retention of personal and professional skills (Imwattana et al., 2020; Levant et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2014). However, this study showed that lectures, readings, and discussions, were among the top methods for teaching nearly all skills. While these are legitimate teaching methods, they do not provide much scope for students to practice and apply skills or to demonstrate learning. Further, because these methods do not generally entail having students apply or demonstrate learning, they allow little opportunity for instructors to provide explicit or individualized feedback. While faculty did identify some active learning strategies such as hands-on activities, role plays, case studies, and so on, these were rarely among the top-ranked strategies, and often were identified by fewer than 10% of respondents. Thus, it may be that faculty are addressing soft skills in their courses, but not in such a way that students are successfully mastering those skills.



### Conclusion

Previous studies have established the importance of personal and professional skills across fields and have often identified a "skills gap" between the level of skills employers seek and what they find in applicants. Those studies often imply that higher education institutions are not adequately preparing students in these areas, even though, as Benbow and Hora (2016) observe, such studies almost always focus on the employers' perspective, without considering faculty perceptions or whether faculty attempt to teach such skills. The respondents of this study largely recognize the importance of soft skills, feel a responsibility to teach these skills, and use multiple methods to teach these skills in their courses. Most also report providing feedback to students on the skills.

With that said, the findings suggest some disconnect between the specific skills sought by employers and what is (or is not) being addressed in the classroom. Although interpersonal, writing, and communication skills are consistently highlighted as important across fields and industries, business faculty are significantly less likely to provide explicit instruction in those skills than many of their counterparts in other fields. Likewise, although field-specific studies have identified customer service and teamwork as "core" skills for library and information science, LIS faculty are the least likely to teach those skills. These findings suggest a possible disconnect in some cases between the skills on which faculty choose to focus and those most in demand in the field. Future discipline-specific research could use Benbow and Hora's (2016) study as a model to examine how well faculty and employer expectations align.

Further, this study indicated that while faculty employ a range of methods to teach personal and professional skills, approaches like lectures, discussions, and readings tend to dominate over more active learning strategies like role plays, case studies, and hands-on practice. This relative lack of active learning approaches could contribute to the skills gap. If students lack opportunities to practice and apply skills, then they might be less likely to master those skills or to be comfortable transferring them from the classroom to the workplace. Further, without hands-on activities, students are unable to demonstrate their learning, which limits opportunities for constructive feedback on those skills. Going forward, faculty might look for ways to incorporate more active learning and hands-on practice of soft skills into their teaching. Future studies might also investigate whether active learning techniques lead to better outcomes regarding these skills.

Given the extent to which faculty are addressing personal and professional skills in their curricula, this study suggests that the disconnect between higher education and employers might not be as wide as

previously thought. Certainly, faculty seem to recognize the importance of personal and professional skills for their students' success in the field. The biggest issues might be which skills are emphasized, and how they are taught. Improved communication between faculty and employers might help to bridge this gap. Professional programs like the ones reviewed for this study might look for new ways to gather input and feedback from the individuals and organizations who will ultimately hire their graduates, and to share information with those individuals and organizations about what steps they take to meet those needs.

### References

- Abe, J. A. (2020). Big five, linguistic styles, and successful online learning. *The Internet and Higher Education, 45*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2019.100724>.
- Anthony, S., & Garner, B. (2016). Teaching soft skills to business students: An analysis of multiple pedagogical methods. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, 79*(3), 360-370.
- Benbow, R. J., & Hora, M. T. (2016). *The cultural nature of valued skills: A qualitative investigation of postsecondary science education and the "skills gap" in Wisconsin*. (WCER Working Paper No. 2016-06). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED580894>.
- Berenson, R., Boyles, G., & Weaver, A. (2008). Emotional intelligence as a predictor of success in online learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 9*(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v9i2.385>.
- Botelho, M. J. & Lima, C. A. (2020). From cultural competence to cultural respect: A critical review of six models. *Journal of Nursing Education, 59*(6), 311-318.  
<https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20200520-03>
- Burning Glass Technologies. (2015). *The human factor: The hard time employers have finding soft skills*. [http://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/Human\\_Factor\\_Baseline\\_Skills\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/Human_Factor_Baseline_Skills_FINAL.pdf).
- Chamorro-Premuzic, T., Arteché, A., Bremner, A. J., Greven, C., & Furnham, A. (2009). Soft skills in higher education: Importance and improvement ratings as a function of individual differences and academic performance. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology, 30*(2), 221-241.
- Craig, R. (2019). America's skills gap: Why it's real and why it matters. *Progressive Policy Institute*.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED600483>.
- Crawford, P., & Fink, W. (2019). Employability skills and students critical growth areas. *NACTA Journal, 64*(1), 122-132.

- Developing soft skills in higher education. (2003.) *PLA Notes*.  
<https://ezproxy.simmons.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsoai&AN=edsoai.on1019035877&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Di Pardo Léon-Henri, D. (2019). Going beyond words and actions: Teaching metacognitive and soft skills to ESP communication students at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution. *Research-Publishing.Net*.
- Díez-Gutiérrez, E., & Díaz-Nafría, J-M. (2018). Ubiquitous learning ecologies for a critical cyber-citizenship. *Comunicar*, 26(54), 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C54-2018-05>.
- Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2014). *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Edwards, R. L. (2018). A program evaluation of performing arts instruction used to improve soft skills. *ProQuest LLC*.
- Ellis, M., Kisling, E., & Hackworth, R. G. (2014). Teaching soft skills employers need. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38, 433–453.
- Gibb, S. (2014). Soft skills assessment: Theory development and the research agenda. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 33(4), 455–471.
- Hart Research Associates. (2018). Fulfilling the American dream: liberal education and the future of work. *American Association of Colleges and Universities*.  
<https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2018EmployerResearchReport.pdf>
- Imwattana, K., Dangrapai, Y., Ngamskulrungraj, P. (2020). Active learning classes in a preclinical year may help improving some soft skills of medical students. *Siriraj Medical Journal*, 72(5). <https://doaj.org/article/c35ed4636f9743d690cf8105f2fad0db>
- Ingols, C., & Shapiro, M. (2014). Concrete steps for assessing the “Soft Skills” in an MBA program. *Journal of Management Education*, 38(3), 412–435. <https://doi.org.ezproxy.simmons.edu/10.1177/1052562913489029>
- Islam, M. T. (2019). (Re)searching for the development of a conceptual model of education for citizenship in the context of young people's globalised mobility in higher education. *Globalisation, Societies & Education*, 17(2), 194–207.
- Jarkiewicz, A. (2020). Using participatory action learning to empower the active citizenship of young people. *Action Learning: Research & Practice*, 17(1), 72–83.
- Jones, W. (2020). *The influence of emotional intelligence training on college student employee workforce readiness*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi]. <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1750/>
- Kukkonen, P. K., Leino, H., Koskinen, S., Salminen, L., & Strandell Laine, C. (2020). Nurse managers' perceptions of the competence of newly graduated nurses: A scoping review. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 28(1), 4.
- Levant, Y., Coulmont, M., & Sandu, R. (2016). Business simulation as an active learning activity for developing soft skills. *Accounting Education*, 25(4), 368–395. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2016.1191272>
- Linked-in Learning. (2018). *Workplace learning report*. <https://learning.linkedin.com/resources/workplace-learning-report-2018>.
- MacCann, C., Jiang, Y., Brown, L. E. R., Double, K. S., Bucich, M., & Minbashian, A. (2020). Emotional intelligence predicts academic performance: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(2), 150–86. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000219.supp>
- Martin, T. N. (2019). Review of student soft skills development using the 5ws/h approach resulting in a realistic, experiential, applied, active learning and teaching pedagogical classroom. *Journal of Behavioral & Applied Management*, 19(1), 41–57.
- Mitchell, G. (2008). *Essential soft skills for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce as perceived by Alabama business/marketing educators*. [Doctoral dissertation, Auburn University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10415/1441>
- Murakami, K. (2020.) Many nonprofit colleges would fail gainful test. *InsideHigherEd*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/01/16/profit-programs-not-only-ones-would-fail-gainful-employment-test>.
- Myers, T.S., Blackman, A., Andersen, T., Hay, R., Lee, I., & Gray, H. (2014). Cultivating ICT students' interpersonal soft skills in online learning environments using traditional active learning techniques. *Journal of Learning Design*, 7(3), 39–53.
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2018). *Employers want to see these attributes on students' resumes*. <https://www.nacweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/employers-want-to-see-these-attributes-on-students-resumes/>.
- Palmer, I. (2015). The growing movement to hold colleges accountable for graduates getting jobs. *New America*. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/hold-colleges-accountable-for-jobs/>.
- Price, J. M., Gilkerson, L., & Barry, J. E. (2018). The mentoring FAN: A promising approach to

- enhancing attunement within the mentoring system. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 44(3), 350-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1472174>
- Protopsaltis, S. (2019). Searching for accountability in higher education: A balanced framework of goals and metrics. *New America*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED599751.pdf>.
- Rebele, J. E., & St. Pierre, E. K. (2019). A commentary on learning objectives for accounting education programs: The importance of soft skills and technical knowledge. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 48(2019), 71-79.
- Robinson, S., & Stubberud, H. A. (2014). Teaching creativity, team work and other soft skills for entrepreneurship. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, 17(2), 186-208.
- Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453-465.
- Saunders, L. (2019). Core and more: Examining foundational and specialized content in library and information science. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 60(1), 3-34.
- Saunders, L. (2015). Professional perspectives on Library and Information Science education. *Library Quarterly* 85(4), 427-453. doi: 10.1086/682735
- Singh, R., & Vorbach, J. (2017). Re-envisioning management education and training for information professionals. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 58(2), 94-105.
- Somerville, S. (2019). Taking responsibility for the graduate skills gap. *Prospects Luminate*. <https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/taking-responsibility-for-the-graduate-skills-gap..>
- Tseng, H., Yi, X., & Yeh, H-T. (2019). Learning -related soft skills among online business students in higher education: Grade level and managerial role differences in self-regulation, motivation, and social skill. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 95, 179-186.
- Turner, B. D. (2019). *STEM employability skills: Employer and faculty expectations and perceptions of skill competencies in STEM graduates*. [Doctoral dissertation, Wilmington University]. <https://delaware.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15323coll5/id/41479/>.
- Valenzuela, V. (2020). *The exploration of employers', educators', and students' perceptions regarding the influence of soft skills for transitioning into the workforce*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of La Verne]. Proquest Dissertations.
- Vista, A. (2020) Data-driven identification of skills for the future: 21st-century skills for the 21st-century workforce. *SAGE Open*, 10(2), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020915904>
- LAURA SAUNDERS is a Professor and Interim Director (Simmons University School of Library and Information Science). She teaches and conducts research in the areas of user services, information literacy, and intellectual freedom. She is the co-author, along with Melissa Wong, of the open access textbook *Instruction in Libraries and Information Settings: An Introduction* and is the 2019 recipient of Simmons University's Provost Award for Excellence in Graduate Teaching.
- STEPHEN BAJJALY is a Professor in the School of Information Sciences at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He served as the head of the school from 2007- 2018. He currently teaches management and leadership and researches online teaching and learning issues.