

EXAMINING THE WORKFORCE SKILLS COMMUNICATION GAP

RESEARCH OVERVIEW
AND KEY FINDINGS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contributing Authors	2
About Our Organizations	4
Introduction	5
Research Highlights & Key Findings	6
1. Workforce Skills Communication Gaps	6
2. Institution-Employer Collaboration	7
3. Measurement of Soft and Hard Skill Learning Outcomes	8
4. Understanding Student Needs	9
5. Student Professional Narrative	10
Conclusion	10
References	12

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research describes a gap between the workforce skills employers need and the skills college graduates bring to the workforce (Coen & Killian, 2019; Weise et al., 2019; Wolff & Booth, 2017). Making strides toward closing the workforce skills gap means that institutions, employers, and students must work together to cultivate a shared understanding of how strategic collaboration and communication are mutually beneficial. Weise et al. (2019) similarly argued that “with a better understanding of jobs, talent readiness, and educational pathways, we can begin to connect our workforce with our postsecondary education and training system and build promising pathways for the future of work” (p. 31). The alignment of workforce trends with learning outcomes used to measure and communicate students’ workforce skill levels has the potential to help close this gap.

As such, the purpose of this study was to examine whether, or to what extent, institutions are using workforce trends to align and measure learning outcomes and help students communicate their levels of workplace skill proficiencies to potential employers. The research questions included:

- How is your institution using workforce trends to align and measure learning outcomes?
- How is your institution utilizing workforce trends to design and measure learning experiences connected to learning outcomes?
- What methods are used at your institution to teach students to communicate their level of skill proficiencies?

This qualitative study is based on interview data gathered from 18 academic leaders, program directors, and faculty at public and private institutions, including two-year technical and community colleges, four-year institutions, and graduate schools across the United States. The research team gathered deep insights through an exploration of data collected from participants’ in-depth responses and an analysis of interview transcripts, recordings, and researcher notes. The findings of this study, situated in the context of the study sample, provide compelling perspectives through which to explore the workforce skills communication gap, a major theme that emerged from the data. Each study participant engaged in a one-hour, semi-structured interview with a member of the research team. Data was coded and analyzed to reveal themes in responses.

This Research Brief presents five key findings on a student workforce skills communication gap, whereby students have appropriate workforce skills upon graduation but may lack the communication skills to effectively articulate these to potential employers. In addition, a Playbook is available that presents strategies for college and university leaders, employers, and students to overcome this workforce skills gap. These strategies will inform stakeholders on how to cultivate a culture of both aligning learning outcomes with in-demand workforce skills and aiding students in developing professional narratives that communicate their workforce skills and proficiencies. These publications provide institutions of higher education with strategies and insights to better apply workforce trends to institutional decision-making, in terms of their programmatic and course design efforts.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS & KEY FINDINGS

1. Workforce Skills Communication Gaps

Highlight Opportunities for Institutional Leadership to Develop Students' Workforce Skill Competencies in Connection to Learning Outcomes

“One of the things that I have recognized as a gap within our program is communication and presentation skills. Our program has been very skills based historically, which a lot of computer science programs are, but our students unfortunately aren't trained to communicate effectively or ask quality questions”

-Assistant Professor of Computer Science, 4 year private university

Study participants reported that many of the students at their institutions are driven to pursue degrees and credentials for the career-advancing potential they believe earning a degree will provide them. Aligning course and program learning outcomes with in-demand workforce skills can foster student motivation and buy-in and cultivate opportunities for students to make informed decisions about their career and program trajectories. Participants noted that a critical component of developing learning outcomes is ensuring that students can not only communicate what they have learned with confidence but that they can also articulate how that knowledge translates into skills that can be used on the job.

“If there’s no opportunity to apply what you’ve learned and to see how the work environment works before you actually commit four years of university training to a career then maybe on day one you suddenly realize that it’s not as you thought.”

-Full-time Faculty - Professor, Community College

While administrators, program directors, and faculty report having robust internal conversations and initiatives to support the linking and measurement of learning outcomes with in-demand skills, students tend to receive little, if any, guidance as they reflect on their progress in relation to these outcomes. Aligning workforce skill competencies with learning outcomes may require partnership building with employers and data collection on workforce trends. These collaborative efforts serve to cultivate a space where school leaders, employers, and students can develop a shared vocabulary to create a common language around course concepts and workplace values.

2. Institution-Employer Collaboration

Create Opportunities to Identify and Utilize Workforce Skill Development Trends for Program Development and Revision

Advisory committees are critical mechanisms for connecting industry and academic leaders, creating opportunities to develop academic programs, and designing curriculum as a means of cultivating in-demand workforce skills in students. To create and sustain a connection and open line of communication with employers, institutions are operationalizing advisory committees and similar collaborative efforts. As workforce trends continue to evolve, there is a need to revisit learning outcomes to maintain alignment between the skills students are learning and the skills required in the workforce. These partnerships may be more difficult to create or sustain for rural schools, according to participants from rural-serving institutions.

“We have advisory committees for every program at the college. They meet twice a year and provide feedback. Let’s say the accounting [program] has a meeting with their advisory committee. The career people that we bring in tell us we’re really seeing a trend in this area and we really need to move more towards this and we will hire those students because they have those skills.”

-Dean of Learning, Technical College

3. Measurement of Soft and Hard Skill Learning Outcomes

Include Learner, Professional, and Field-Specific Skills in Curriculum

“I haven’t seen where students are not meeting the objective, so I guess I could say that I feel like our students are getting to see these areas that we’ve designated as important. That’s kind of how we measure it at this point but I wish it was more. Obviously that goes only so far and I wish I could say I knew for a fact that they were prepared enough to enter the workforce.”

-Lecturer & Degree Director, 4 year public university

While connecting knowledge to experience support students’ mastery of skills like critical thinking, it also provides a framework for students to develop their professional narratives. In their work on student skills, Youatt and Wilcox (2008) argued that “integrative learning asks students to connect skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences, apply theory to practice in various settings, utilize diverse and even contradictory points of view, and understand issues and positions contextually” (p. 25). Soft skills, or core abilities, equip students with a toolbox of skills that is useful in both the classroom and across career fields.

“In our welding programs, we have to communicate effectively as one of our core abilities. To communicate effectively is to contextualize what they would do in a welding shop, versus auto. What they do is very different. Every one of our programs has consistent core abilities, but it looks different, according to the area of the workforce.”

-Director of Instructional Effectiveness & Flexible Learning, Technical College

While the measurement of program learning outcomes is, or appears to be, a consistent topic of discussion and component of strategic planning across institutional types, the scaffolding and measurement of learning experiences is much less reliable and more piecemeal. At a number of participant institutions, a patchwork of learning experience options are developed at the course and faculty levels, which makes measurement at the program and institutional levels more difficult. What emerged from the data is two sets of learning outcomes: (1) learning outcomes across all programs and (2) learning outcomes that are program specific. It is critical that all learning outcomes are measured to explore a student’s level of preparation.

4. Understanding Student Needs

Help Faculty, Programs, and Institutions Foster Student and Workforce Success

“Intrusive advising is when you recognize that a student has some barriers that may be getting in the way of them being successful. And you will work with them on that. And once again, that could be housing. Maybe they’ve lost their house. Maybe they don’t have stable food.”

-Program Coordinator, Community College

Cognizant of the multiple pathways into higher education, institution leaders and educators are engaging students across the spectrums of age and experience. Meeting the needs of all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, while also addressing the expectations of employers is crucial to foster student workforce success. Participants described the needs of students at their institutions and provided best practices for fostering student success in ways that connect to students’ career goals. Understanding the barriers students face is a critical step in developing strategies to support degree or credential completion and success in the workforce.

“I think one of the great things about the grant was having a navigator for each program and each school, and the navigator would work with each student on soft skills, career counseling and resume assistance. It’s kind of like an academic advisor or like a success coach or what I would call a combination of those. I would say the navigator position can make or break a program.”

-Program Coordinator, Community College

Advising, career counseling, and other student support services provide key touch-points for school leaders to learn more about students’ career goals and the support they may need to be successful. Open communication across institutional departments and offices regarding trends in student barriers and career objectives may create positive discourse for strategic planning. As institutional resources and capacity to meet student needs vary across institutions, so does the extent to which institutions can aid in reducing student barriers by providing support services.



5. Student Professional Narrative

Teach Students to Develop their Professional Narrative and Effectively Communicate Workplace Skill Proficiencies

“I think the missing hurdle is that the students don’t get the vocabulary to talk about the skills they’ve learned.”

- Associate Dean, 4-year public university

While many participants noted that a communication gap is one they had not considered before, they also described their efforts to create opportunities for students to journal and have conversations about their academic and professional experiences. Although higher education professionals engage with employers about workforce trends through advisory committees and the development of competency-based education programs, the relationship between institutions and employers could be strengthened, as well as made transparent and accessible to include students. Students must be provided with the vocabulary to describe their skills, strengths, and ability to succeed in the workplace using the knowledge gained in their academic program.

“We have to intentionally create opportunities and pathways for them to express themselves. In this context, we can’t not bond and connect in a real way with our students, and then expect them to have those ‘aha’ moments and share them with us, especially since we’re in a virtual setting.”

-Internship Coordinator, Public 4 Year University

Conclusion

The central finding of this study is the existence of a workforce skills communication gap, whereby students have appropriate workforce skills upon graduation but may lack the communication skills to effectively articulate these to potential employers. In addition, this brief highlights an opportunity to close the perceived workforce skills gap by implementing innovative educational practices for teaching students to effectively communicate their workforce skill proficiency. By teaching students to construct compelling professional narratives, educators equip students to articulate how their strengths align with employers’ expectations. This study highlights the importance of



building robust communication structures and strategies for learning about current workforce trends.

One limitation of this study was that the participants did not include employers or industry leaders. Future research should explore the impact of virtual learning on institutions' strategic planning around learning outcomes and workforce skills development. Institutional leaders should strategically collaborate with employers and teach students to communicate to employers the levels of learner, professional, and technical skills they bring to the workforce as new professionals and beyond. These strategies will inform stakeholders on how to cultivate a culture of both aligning learning outcomes with in-demand workforce skills and help students develop professional narratives that communicate their workforce skills and proficiencies.

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