
AUGUST 2022

HANNAH DALPORTO
MARCO LEPE

IMPLEMENTING SOFT- SKILLS PROGRAMS IN A POSTSECONDARY SETTING

Lessons from the New World of Work

Increasingly, companies are dropping four-year degree requirements in job postings, favoring skill-based requirements—such as communication and writing—instead.¹ These types of nonacademic “soft skills” are viewed as essential for employment—employers consistently cite these abilities as among the most valuable in job applicants, yet also the most difficult to assess.² (See Box 1 for a definition of these skills.)

In response to this growing emphasis on soft skills, postsecondary educators are looking for ways to teach the skills explicitly.³ The aim is to produce graduates with recognizable competency not only in academic and career-technical skills, but also in the soft skills needed to navigate a modern, diverse, and rapidly evolving work environment.

This brief outlines practical considerations and recommendations for developing and implementing soft-skills programs, curricula, and instruction in a postsecondary setting. These qualitative lessons are culled from an in-depth examination of a soft-skills training and assessment program called the New World of Work (NWoW). NWoW was selected for this study in part because it combines three components theorized to strengthen soft skills:

- 1** A classroom curriculum with direct instruction in 10 soft skills⁴
- 2** A concurrent, work-based learning experience
- 3** An assessment and credential-granting component (digital badges)⁵

BOX 1
DEFINING SOFT SKILLS

This brief uses the term “soft skills,” also known as “noncognitive,” “employability,” “baseline,” or “twenty-first-century” skills. Soft skills can be defined as personal attributes, abilities, and habits that enable effective individual and group work in settings such as college and the workplace. They encompass social-emotional abilities related to communication, social interactions, and problem-solving, as well as skills such as digital fluency that are critical to success in college and careers.

SOURCES: Laura H. Lippman, Renee Ryberg, Rachel Carney, and Kristin A. Moore, [Key “Soft Skills” that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields](#) (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2015); College and Career Readiness and Success Center, [“Integrating Employability Skills: A Framework for All Educators”](#) (Washington, DC: College and Career Readiness and Success Center at American Institutes for Research, 2019).

The NWoW curriculum was developed in 2012 and supported in its early operations by the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office and the Foundation for California Community colleges. It has been deployed at over 75 community colleges in California, as well as high schools, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. From 2016 to 2022 the research team conducted four rounds of site visits, and spoke with 16 instructors across five community colleges pilot testing the program, 37 students in focus group settings, and 15 employers. Insights from these conversations and site visits inform this brief.

HOW CAN PROGRAMS CONNECT SOFT-SKILL CLASSROOM LEARNING WITH REAL-WORLD WORK?

Where Possible, Encourage Students to Obtain Work Experiences at the Same Time as They Receive Classroom Instruction.

Students’ soft-skills learning may be reinforced by concurrent, hands-on experience in the workplace. Work experiences can also provide real-world context for deeper learning in a course, as students can discuss how they applied a skill. Many researchers argue that soft skills are best mastered by learning both in the classroom and in work experiences where the skills can be practiced and demonstrated.⁶ The NWoW study model aligns with this recommendation by encouraging concurrent student experiences in the workplace to bolster classroom instruction. In interviews, participants agreed that this pairing was helpful, and voiced a desire to continue to strengthen connections between work positions and NWoW instruction.

If programs and educators can help students find work experiences, they may best reinforce the soft skills taught in the classroom by encouraging students to work at least a few hours a week (or

around 60 hours over the course of a semester). Though a shorter-term work experience (say, a one-time workplace observation) can hold some value, NWoW students, instructors, and employers reported that increased work hours helped them learn the skills needed for their jobs and build more meaningful relationships in their work positions. Although some might have concerns that work could interfere with academics, research has shown that working up to 10 hours per week (which translates to about 160 hours a semester) is actually associated with a boost to students' grade point averages.⁷ Where possible, students should be supported in finding paid work experiences, which ensures that students without financial safety nets can also benefit from concurrent work.

Students who have work experience to draw on can deepen their learning by using online discussion boards and similar forums. In NWoW, online discussions provided a tangible way for students to connect their classroom learning with their work experiences in real time. Additionally, students benefited from learning about their peers' work experiences because it made concrete to them the ways skills could be applied to different work environments. As one instructor explained, "A student . . . who was doing an internship with an educational outreach program, and another student who's doing an internship with an after-school program—they were able to support each other and be successful in ways that I don't think they could have been independently."

Set up Ways for Students to Get Evaluations on Their Performance from Employers.

For students in active work experiences, there should be a clear avenue for soliciting information from employer/supervisors about how students are applying and refining the skills being taught in the classroom. NWoW interviewees felt that creating a clearer structure for employers to tell students (and potentially their instructors) about how they were doing using soft skills in the workplace could improve students' ability to practice and reflect on those skills.

There is a tension between two goals here: On the one hand, programs want to provide employers with resources to allow them to link their employees' performance to the NWoW skills. On the other, they want to avoid overburdening employers. Most employers interviewed were enthusiastic about guiding students through their work experiences. But employers had mixed feelings about their level of involvement in connecting soft-skills learning to these work positions. Some expressed a desire to take on more responsibility, while others felt that the responsibility should be placed on instructors and students.

To balance this tension, programs can require students to set up soft-skills-centered check-in meetings with their supervisors. This structure may help students learn about how they are applying specific skills, while being sensitive to employers' or supervisors' other demands. Finally, employers may benefit from simply being made aware of the order and timing of skills lessons. Such awareness could allow them to discuss explicitly with students the skills they are learning at a given time, and to talk about how they relate to the students' job performance.

Consider Elevating Skill Assessments into Credentials Employers Can See.

The NWoW program includes a formal assessment tied to each of the 10 skills taught. Once students complete a skill assessment, they earn a digital badge that is offered through an online platform. These badges are a form of “microcredential” and are designed to signal competencies in discrete soft skills to potential employers. As the practice of credentialing gains influence, providing this opportunity to students may become a priority for programs.⁸ A companion blog post will outline a number of ways programs can attempt to increase the credibility of their credentials.⁹

Programs interested in strengthening their assessments or creating microcredentials can turn to psychometric analysis—a branch of psychology that focuses on the measurement of “latent constructs” that cannot be directly observed. For those interested in applying tools from this discipline to soft-skills assessments, a companion brief will outline lessons learned, limitations to the approach, and practical tips.¹⁰

HOW CAN PROGRAMS AND EDUCATORS STRUCTURE SOFT-SKILL INSTRUCTION?

Focus on Teaching a Small Number of Skills, in Depth.

The NWoW curriculum has a module of instruction on each of 10 distinct soft skills. However, staff members and students agreed that teaching all 10 in a single course was often infeasible due to the structure of the course or time constraints, and most ended up teaching just a few skills per course. Programs may benefit, then, from limiting the scope of courses to focus on a few soft skills in depth.

While various soft-skills course formats have competing pros and cons, in NWoW the “fewer skills” approach seemed to work best across the board. Some colleges in the study added the soft-skills lessons to an existing credit-bearing course, such as a work-experience class or even an English class. The benefit of integrating the curriculum into credit-bearing courses is that students may be motivated to show up regularly, and programs can avoid the bureaucracy sometimes associated with creating new registered courses; the downside is that time is constrained by the existing course materials, so instructors may have further limitations on how many skills they can cover in a class. In contrast, in colleges where the curriculum was offered through stand-alone, noncredit workshops, instructors could structure their courses more flexibly. However, low attendance and completion issues presented a challenge in these circumstances, with students dropping in sporadically and with only a limited number completing skill assessments and badges. Regardless of course format, keeping the curriculum focused on a few skills can also allow instructors to integrate their teaching better with students’ work experiences—for example, by creating space for employer visits.

When determining which skills to focus on, programs should consider the local labor market, students’ job industries, and those jobs’ local work settings and skill requirements.¹¹ Programs

may also benefit from surveying local employers or employers in institutional advisory boards. Seeking advice from instructors can also be useful. For example, NWoW instructors said that communication and collaboration were the most relevant skills they taught that were most demanded by both employers and students.

Provide Avenues for Online Instruction, but Keep Lessons in Real Time.

Given the current trend toward online-only and hybrid courses—a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—it appears more important than ever for programs to develop effective strategies and platforms to deliver soft-skills curricula online. Though the NWoW curriculum was originally developed to be taught in person, instructors across at least three of the five colleges in the study adapted the lessons to be taught online. This option made the curriculum more accessible—reaching a broader range of students—and made it easier to incorporate videos and multimedia content.

Online instruction offers many benefits due to its flexibility. However, staff and student interviews also suggested that soft-skills programs need to build regular opportunities for student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions into courses. One student explained: “I like [NWoW] online. I think that what I miss out on is interaction with students.” Another student shared, “It was convenient online for especially my early schedule, but it’s also good to have relationships in classes.” The online discussion forums mentioned above as a way to allow students to discuss their work experiences are one good way to promote such interactions. Making online courses synchronous—that is, having students complete a curriculum at the same pace, in the same order—may also provide a structure that allows more opportunities for student-to-student learning.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Joseph B. Fuller, Christina Langer, Julia Nitschke, Layla O’Kane, Matthew Sigelman, and Bledi Taska, *The Emerging Degree Reset: How the Shift to Skills-Based Hiring Holds the Keys to Growing the U.S. Workforce at a Time of Talent Shortage* (The Burning Glass Institute, 2022).
- 2 National Association of Colleges and Employers, “Key Attributes Employers Want to See On Students’ Resumes” (website: www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/key-attributes-employers-want-to-see-on-students-resumes, 2020); Graduate Management Admission Council, *Corporate Recruiters Survey Report 2017* (Reston, VA: Graduate Management Admission Council, 2017); Barbara A. Ritter, Erika E. Small, John W. Mortimer, and Jessica L. Doll, “Designing Management Curriculum for Workplace Readiness: Developing Students’ Soft Skills,” *Journal of Management Education* 42, 1 (2018): 80–103; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Bridging the Soft Skills Gap* (Washington, DC: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2016).

- 3 Jennifer Warrner, “Integrating Soft Skills into an Academic Curriculum,” paper presented at the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education 2020 Conference (online, October 27–30, 2020); Malar Hirudayaraj, Rose Baker, Francie Baker, and Mike Eastman, “Soft Skills for Entry-Level Engineers: What Employers Want,” *Education Sciences* 11, 10 (2021); Shilpa Banerji, “Report: Employers Say College Graduates Lack Essential Skills to Succeed in Today’s Global Economy,” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* (website: www.diverseeducation.com/leadership-policy/article/15083113/report-employers-say-college-graduates-lack-essential-skills-to-succeed-in-todays-global-economy, 2007); Cynthia Ingols and Mary Shapiro, “Concrete Steps for Assessing the ‘Soft Skills’ in an MBA Program,” *Journal of Management Education* 38, 3 (2014): 412–435.
- 4 The 10 soft-skill lessons offered by NWoW were determined by NWoW in partnership with the Mozilla Foundation. The skills are “adaptability,” “analysis/solution mindset,” “collaboration,” “communication,” “digital fluency,” “entrepreneurial mindset,” “empathy,” “resilience,” “self-awareness,” and “social/diversity awareness.”
- 5 For more information about employer perspectives on digital badges, please see Parker Cellura and Marco Lepe, “What Do Employers Want to See from Soft-Skills Credentials?” (New York: MDRC, forthcoming).
- 6 William C. Symonds, Robert Schwartz, and Ronald F. Ferguson, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Pathways to Prosperity Project, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 2011); NAF, “Work-Based Learning: Critical Infrastructure for a Future-Ready Workforce” (New York: NAF, 2021); Thomas R. Bailey, Katherine L. Hughes, and David T. Moore, *Working Knowledge: Work-Based Learning and Education Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 7 Laura W. Perna, *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications for Policy and Practice* (Herndon, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2010).
- 8 Rusty Greiff, “3 Reasons Microcredentials Are Poised to Go Mainstream,” *eCampus News* (<https://www.ecampusnews.com/2022/06/27/3-reasons-microcredentials-are-poised-to-go-mainstream>, 2022).
- 9 Cellura and Lepe (forthcoming).
- 10 Edith Yang, Peter Halpin, and Daniel Handy, “Using Psychometric Analysis to Improve Soft-Skills Assessments” (New York: MDRC, forthcoming).
- 11 Notably, though the setting and nature of work has shifted for many due to the pandemic, one recent study conducted by the Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology found that “the soft skills identified prior to the pandemic were still relevant even though some work has shifted from offices to remote locations.” See Hirudayaraj, Baker, Baker, and Eastman (2021).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief is dedicated to the memory of Chase Johnson, whose invaluable efforts on this study showcased his passion for improving higher education and helping those in need. Special thanks to staff members and students from Folsom Lake College, Hartnell College, Lassen Community College, Shasta College, and Santa Rosa Junior College for their insights, as well as employer partners from across the state of California. Thanks also to the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office and the Foundation for California Community Colleges for their partnership and support throughout the study. The authors would also like to thank Evan Weissman, Rosario Torres, Daniel Handy, and Rajinder Gill for their significant research and management contributions to the project, as well as Parker Cellura for his indispensable coordination of this brief. Funding for the New World of Work project and this brief was provided by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through grant R305A170304 to MDRC. Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

Copyright © 2022 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

NEW YORK
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Flr., New York, NY 10281
Tel: 212 532 3200

OAKLAND
475 14th Street, Suite 750, Oakland, CA 94612
Tel: 510 663 6372

WASHINGTON, DC
750 17th Street, NW, Suite 501
Washington, DC 20006

LOS ANGELES
11965 Venice Boulevard, Suite 402
Los Angeles, CA 90066

