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Commentary

Why American Universities Should Offer Courses in Soft Skills

By Darrell Ezell | March 16, 2017

In the September 2011 FastCoexist article, *Is the MSW the New MBA*, Christine Bader outlines that hard skills are no longer complementary in an environment where a softer approach is required. Her take on contemporary corporate failures demonstrates the need for ongoing soft skill development that social workers exercise in their daily interaction. The idea that soft skills has a place in American higher education is a new conversation that challenges traditional perspectives of whether hard measurable general education courses outweigh courses that train students in practical social skills.

As both cultural and moral-based matters increase within society and the workplace, graduates will be required to navigate new terrain outside of the parameters of their general field of study. The last three decades points to these new challenges as some organization slowly shift from traditional horizontal leadership models to vertical (flat) organizations. In flat organizations, the team-based approach is a new norm in industries that require employees apply non-analytic skills and an ability to collaborate as a team to execute high priority projects.

Considering the global climate, it is a no-brainer that by enhancing a student's soft skillset will be beneficial to their future work environment and the economy. As demand for graduates with soft skills increase, some colleges and universities are introducing alternative general education courses in *teamwork, cross-cultural communication, problem solving, social change, and conflict resolution* to compliment high paradigm degrees in the hard sciences.

Ensuring Marketability

With this in mind, U.S. administrators may wish to consider the value of ensuring their graduates are marketable when they leave their institution. While the majority of courses in an academic program fall into an area of concentration or field of study, those left fall into the pool of general studies or courses that traditionally focus on providing those hard measurable skills. For example, The University of Indiana at Bloomington makes the case that General Education "encourages exploration and discovery while preparing a solid foundation for learners, both before and after graduation."

Thomas Edison State College builds on this point by identifying that its general education courses are organized into four main categories: *Intellectual and Practical Skills, Civic and Global Leadership, Knowledge of Human Culture, and Understanding of the Physical and Natural World*. While many non-flagship schools in the U.S. are willing to pivot, landmark establishments as the University of Michigan and state funded institutions as California State Los Angeles, in part, maintain several traditional general education course offerings reflective of English Composition I & II, Men's Health, and World Religion. In the days ahead, ensuring graduates are marketable will require academic administrators foster a broad perspective which includes identifying those

core soft skills that are appealing to industry specific employers. However, moving in this direction will require administrators look to countries that are increasing in diversity as the United Kingdom to identify approaches that are nimble and progressive.

Looking to a Global Model

Long are the days when students can receive robotic training and enter the workforce at 21 and retire from the same job after 30 years. Today, it is expected that the new graduate will likely have three to five jobs throughout their career. If this is the case, an extra layer of competency will be essential. For this reason, U.S. post-secondary institutions should look to the U.K. and its current systems at both the college and university levels that seek to integrate and reinforce soft skill learning. Nearly two decades ago, U.K. lawmakers identified key trends related to immigration that suggested that increased cross-cultural relations would soon become a social norm. With some businesses moving toward flat organizational models, top U.K. universities as The University of Birmingham and University of Manchester are currently partnering with both lawmakers and corporations to ensure graduate employability.

Outside of academia, soft skill development remains a top priority. As the January 2015 report on *The Value of Soft Skills to the UK Economy* highlights the need to, “offer high quality training in the skills people need entering employment, and to provide a platform for acquiring new skills throughout their working lives.” As UK colleges and universities are committed to offering soft skill and service skill training (e.g. mock interviews, CV assistance, and crisis leadership training), McDonald’s, its largest employer, is equally committed to training its workers in what it identifies as six soft-skill clusters: communication, decision-making/practical skills, self-management, teamwork, professionalism, and leadership. Some of the UK’s largest employers as Tesco, ASDAN, and Aon are already following McDonald UK’s model of soft skill integration training for new and previous employees.

The Soft Approach in Hard Situations

The demand for graduates with core soft skills is increasing in an era where understanding how to build effective relations across divisions of culture is essential. In true *Drucker* fashion, this point conjures a final thought here that ‘*common sense eats scholarship for breakfast.*’ While it is important that we do not flirt with the assumption that general education courses should be overhauled, it is equally important to understand that relying on outmoded hard skills will leave the American student at a loss. The 1994 film, *What About Bob*, starring Richard Dreyfus as Dr. Leo Marvin (an uptight psychiatrist) and Bill Murray as Bob Wiley (a psychiatric patient) presents a visual of how competency in one’s field of study and hard skills are both rendered useless when work and life require a softer approach. Hence, the reality is clear that analytical skills are vital to understand the problem, but, as in the case of Bob, establishing and sustaining unlikely relationships requires listening and applying soft skills in collaboration and dialogue to transform a crisis into a habitable environment.

Thus, graduates that are capable of leading diverse teams will have an advantage against colleagues who are solely adept in their areas of specialization. The Engineer who can display her capability to lead multinational teams across cultural lines will be poised to work for Boeing or

Lockheed Martin. The same goes for the K-12 teacher with hopes to work for the Houston School District. Given the stakes, U.S. administrators should acknowledge these growing demands and tweak its existing general education curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate levels to prepare our existing and future millennial workforces.