Soft Skills for Hard Work

Working Concept

Soft Skills for Hard Work addresses the need for soft skills in the modern global job market by implementing various exercises such as workshops and assignments into the frameworks of pre-existing courses, giving students the competitive edge necessary to advance as productive employees in their future careers.

Rationale, Problem Statement, and Opportunity for Growth

The skills taught at a community college can generally be divided into those that are specific and measurable for improving academic proficiency, known as hard skills, and less tangible, complementary skills, known as soft skills. Robles (2012) defines soft skills as "character traits, attitudes and behaviours-rather than technical aptitude or knowledge. Soft skills are the intangible, non-technical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (Robles, 2012, p. 457). Defining the scope of soft skills is not straightforward. There are multiple definitions for soft skills because it can cover all interpersonal, business, and communication skills. Skills in resume writing, professional etiquette, interviewing capabilities, critical thinking, and having an optimistic attitude can be showcased in a professional setting by polishing these attributes.

Soft skill development has become increasingly relevant in recent years, as employers across the globe have shifted from seeking primarily hard skills to instead desiring a strong balance of both hard and soft skills (Schulz, 2008). According to the National Soft Skills Association, a 1918 study conducted by Charles Riborg Mann, through the Carnegie Foundation, showed that 85% of all job success stems from well-developed soft skills and people skills (National Soft Skills Association, 2015). Despite these statistics being over one hundred years old, it still applies today, thus, the need for a focus on soft skills to be integrated into higher education.

Currently MGCCC does not collect data pertaining to soft skills training. However, the college does collect data on hard skills in five general education areas - communication skills, mathematical problem solving skills, oral communication skills, critical thinking skills, and use and interaction with technology. From these five areas, communication skills, oral communication skills, and critical thinking skills most closely relate to soft skills, and the data collected in the 2016-2017 academic year show MGCCC is doing well in these areas. For example, 92% of students in English Composition I successfully composed effective written communication based on the thesis criteria on the final essay. Similarly, 90% of students in Public Speaking successfully demonstrated their ability to present an effective persuasive speech.

In addition to SLO data collected, employers of graduates from career-technical programs completed MGCCC's Annual Employer Survey, which measured employer's perceptions of MGCCC graduates to include measures in the same five general education areas. The data from the employer survey show, on a scale from 1(Strongly Disagree) to 4(Strongly Agree),

employers feel MGCCC's career-technical graduates demonstrated exceptional written communication skills (M = 3.33, n = 42), exceptional oral communication skills (M = 3.39, n=46), and exceptional critical thinking skills (M = 3.45, n=47). Therefore from the hard skills data collected, it is evident that stakeholders involved in ***Soft Skills for Hard Work*** will successfully implement soft skills training.

The framework for ***Soft Skills for Hard Work*** incorporates soft skill development for students with the intention of a higher rate of employability, increased self-confidence and awareness when entering the job market. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College's Strategic Plan 2020 supports the goals of this QEP:

- "Develop and maintain innovative and market-driven programs focusing on the employability of students in a global market" (MGCCC, 2012, p. 2).
- "Create and support a student-centered learning environment that encourages active learning" (MGCCC, 2012, p. 2).
- "Provide employment support services for students and alumni to increase placement and better connect the college's programs to potential employers throughout the district" (MGCCC, 2012, p. 4).

In order to meet the needs of the ever-evolving job market, MGCCC would be serving the best interests of its graduates to integrate soft skills into courses required for most degrees, complementing hard skills in a way that provides student-centered, pragmatic lectures. Soft skills will require active learning by definition: students must interact with peers, instructors, and employers in order to improve.

Expected Outcomes/Impact on Student Success

The absence of data for academic programs versus career-technical students creates a gap in interpretation locally; however, soft skill implementation would improve students' professional capabilities and self-efficacy, creating qualified and able-minded students who will be ready for future endeavors in their desired career fields.

Strategies/Actions to Be Implemented

Based on the effectiveness of pre-existing action plans designed and applied elsewhere in the United States and abroad, instruction in soft skills has been shown to provide exceptional opportunities for student growth. The more opportunities and activities students are provided, the better students will be equipped to utilize their aptitude for those skills. Table 1 shows the proposed actions to be implemented. This is not an exhaustive list of activities to support soft skills training and can be easily amended.

Table 1

*Strategies for Implementing **Soft Skills for Hard Work***

QEP Activity Topic	Content
Personality Tests	• Students take personality archetype tests to understand and develop their own unique soft skill palate.
Resume Writing	• Write a resume • Receive resume feedback from local companies' recruiters. • Receive "first impression" feedback from local companies' recruiters • Create a LinkedIn profile.
Professional Correspondence	• Write professional emails to address instructors and potential employers • Write thank you notes as a follow-up to interviews
Dining Room Etiquette	• Learn formal dining etiquette, including dinnerware placement, for professional settings
Mock Interviews	• Appropriate attire • Maintaining eye contact • Handshakes • How to answer key interview questions • How to ask follow-up interview questions

Student Cohort

Execution would follow a two-phase plan. Initial implementation, the pilot phase, would solely focus on academic students enrolled in honors courses. Data would be collected at the end of the pilot phase, and a formative assessment would be conducted, so that any modifications could be made. With success, further implementation will incorporate all general education courses.

The literature on soft skills addresses the need for students in academic courses to receive soft skills training, and weaving soft skills into hard skills courses is most effective (Schulz, 2008). According to Schulz (as cited in AGR, 2007), the British Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), reported employers found that many graduates who were academically proficient, were "lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning." Soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping how an individual will perform during the job selection process and post-employment. As more employers prioritize soft skills over

hard skills, students will require reinforcement in key characteristics to maintain a competitive edge.

Measurement/Assessment

Measuring soft skills is more difficult than assessing hard skills; however, it is possible to gauge certain qualitative aspects of a student's personality and situational responses, as well as, quantitative elements such as percentage of students who find employment within a certain timeframe post-graduation.

Presently, the student learning objectives (SLOs) adopted by MGCCC do not measure soft skills. Likewise, MGCCC's Annual Employer Survey feedback is only available for career-technical graduates. The same data is not available for any academic programs; therefore, providing a similar employer survey for academic programs would offer a formative measurement to compare technical career statistics to academic statistics.

Potential methods for measurement include:
- Pre- and post-semester questionnaires determining aspects such as comfortability in social settings, interview etiquette, and resume writing capabilities, to be administered by instructors to students
- Adding SLOs for soft skills to report data on soft skill activities
- Adding items to the current Undergraduate Exit survey addressing soft skills
- Providing commensurate post-graduate/employment surveys for academic students

Resources

Exercises on soft skills can be included in requisite courses, such as English Composition I or Public Speaking, considering that both naturally lend themselves to certain soft skills such as communication. However, all departments can play a key role in providing soft skills training by adopting one or more of the activities developed. Implementation into current courses rather than creating new courses would ensure a fluid transition for faculty and students along with keeping costs minimal.

Initial training for faculty would be provided through professional development workshops and/or presentations. Additionally, to utilize a system already in place, a Canvas QEP course shell with distinct modules would provide an online resource database that includes assignment templates and rubrics for exercises such as resume or professional correspondence writing and/or instructions for ease of implementation. Additionally, a similar Canvas course shell would be provided for students. This resource would equip teachers with tools to allow mastery in directing these new strategies effectively in class.

Contact Information

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