SkillsUSA: A Community College Partnership Impacting Workforce Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

While there is concern over the controversial topic of the skills gap (American Society for Training and Development, 2009; Galagan, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; ManpowerGroup, 2012) in the U.S. workforce, SkillsUSA is an international organization that brings high schools, two-year colleges, and the global workforce together to promote a labor force that is skilled and motivated. This article briefly chronicles the recent 2012 SkillsUSA National Competition held in Kansas City, Missouri, June 23 – 27, 2012. Included in the discussion is the application of skills that mirror workforce expectations within each category of competition, with implications for community college practice and student workforce outcomes. SkillsUSA is not a replacement for high school or community college student learning outcomes; rather, the organization is a partnership with high schools and community colleges for the purpose of skills alignment between our educational institutions and employer expectations.

SkillsUSA vs. Skills Gap

The skills gap has been formally defined by the ASTD (American Society of Training and Development, 2009, p.4) as "a significant gap between an organization's current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals. It is the point at which an organization can no longer grow or remain competitive because it cannot fill critical jobs with employees who have the right knowledge, skills and abilities." To counter the skills gap, SkillsUSA is a partnership of students, teachers and industry working together to ensure America has a skilled and motivated workforce.

The content of the SkillsUSA program helps students excel in their respective field of practice by identifying and enabling the development of critical and technical skills that are 'real-time' relevant to the workforce. The influence that SkillsUSA brings to the issue of the skills gap is that the organization functions as liaison between educational institutions and business and industry to align student skills development to the current needs of the workforce. Additionally, SkillsUSA offers competition venues (state, national and international) to validate the skills that students have achieved in direct relation to global workforce expectations.

Methods, Materials, and Nationals

In June of 2012, over 15,000 people (student competitors, advisors, members of the workforce, event judges, vendors, parents) from all across the U.S. and its territories came together in Kansas City, Missouri, to compete in 94 different areas of workforce skills demonstrations at *The 48th Annual National Leadership and Skills Conference* (see Table 1). Within each competition, the evaluators were from business, industry, and professional organizations. These evaluators brought to the process significant industry certifications,

professional and technical degrees, and decades of composite experiences to identify and assess

workforce methods and materials in the 94 areas of concentration.

What is important for high schools—and community colleges in particular—to

understand is that at the national competition these evaluators bring current skills information to

the event, as well as testing skills needed in the present expectations of the workforce. Student

skills that are examined at the event are a reflection of the training and education provided by

community colleges at a level that is specific to an employee 'at work' in that field of work.

Stated differently, the skills that are measured are those currently sought by the workforce.

Therefore, these evaluators specifically target the skills gap throughout the national competition.

Table 1

The 48ᵗʰ Annual National Leadership and Skills Conference Competitor Categories

SkillsUSA National Competition Areas (94 Areas of Concentration) and Professional Development	
Student meetings, debriefings, seminars, tours and activities; also, this list includes presentations and workshops for Skills University	3-D Visualization and Animation; Action Skills; Advertising Design; American Spirit; Architectural Drafting; Audio/Radio Production; Automated Manufacturing Technology; Automotive Refinishing Technology; Automotive Service Technology; Aviation Maintenance Technology; Basic Health Care Skills; Broadcast News Production; Building Maintenance; Cabinetmaking; Career Pathways Showcase; Carpentry; Chapter Business Procedure; Chapter Display; CNC Milling; CNC Turning; Collision Repair Technology; Commercial Baking; Community Service; Computer Maintenance Technology; Computer Programming; Cosmetology; Crime Scene Investigation; Criminal Justice; Culinary Arts; Customer Service; Dental Assisting; Diesel Equipment Technology; Electrical Construction Wiring; Electronics Technology; Employment Application Process; Engineering Technology/Design; Entrepreneurship; Esthetics; Extemporaneous Speaking; Firefighting; First Aid/CPR; Food and Beverage Service; Graphic Communications; Health Knowledge Bowl; Health Occupations Professional Portfolio; Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration; Industrial Motor Control; Internetworking; Job Interview; Job Skills Demonstration A & Open; Major Appliance and Refrigeration Technology; Marine Service Technology; Masonry; Mechatronics; Medical Assisting; Medical Math; Medical Terminology; Mobile Electronics Installation (Demonstration); Mobile Robotic Technology; Motorcycle Service Technology; Nail Care; Nurse Assisting; Occupational Health and Safety; Opening and Closing Ceremonies; Outstanding Chapter; Photography; Pin Design (State Conference); Plumbing; Power Equipment Technology; Practical Nursing; Precision Machining Technology; Prepared Speech; Preschool Teaching Assistant; Principles of Technology; Promotional Bulletin Board; Quiz Bowl; Related Technical Math; Residential Systems Installation and Maintenance Technology; Robotics and Automation Technology; Screen Printing Technology; Sheet Metal; Sustainability Solutions (Demonstration); Teamworks; Technical Computer Applications; Technical Drafting; Telecommunications Cabling; Television (Video) Production; T-Shirt Design; Video Product Development; Web Design; Welding; Welding Fabrication; Welding Sculpture; SkillsUSA University (Workshops and Concurrent Sessions)

Source: *SkillsUSA Official Program Guide, June 20-27, 2012, Kansas City*

The Impact of the SkillsUSA Partnership in Preparation for State and Nationals

Long before the teams leave their respective high schools and community colleges for state and national competitions, there are months of rigorous preparation. As part of this overall preparation cycle, SkillsUSA provides significant materials in the form of DVDs, state and national web sites with a substantial amount of information for competition preparation, and professional development activities that are part of the workforce experience. For example, not only are the technical skills developed to the highest extent possible, there are numerous activities that inform the process: local chapters participate in community service projects; leadership skills are developed through the election and service of chapter officers and active-responsible membership by all; marketing efforts to promote the chapter and raise travel revenue are undertaken; the practice of operational teamwork to prepare for individual and collective outcomes are established and maintained as a chapter requirement in preparation for competitions and leadership at all levels; and, a continuous improvement effort that requires students to consciously understand that the work they are doing is preparation for their futures—not simply mundane work for classes they complete or solely for SkillsUSA competitions.

Within the scope of the materials provided by SkillsUSA, there is a consistent layer of skills requirements that—when developed—specifically counter the skills gap. Using the example of web design from Table 1, the materials provided by SkillsUSA are not solely their organizational interpretation of current skills needed in this area of work; rather, the materials reflect the skills needed by employers in the area of web design as a result of information gathered from those who are the professional web designers and who hire employees with the required skills to ensure organizational success. This alignment of skills and leadership to the workforce is what SkillsUSA contributes to the educational development of our students.

At the community college level, using the SkillsUSA materials as a guide to meet the learning outcomes of students preparing for employment is critical to their respective success in the workplace. While it is not presupposed that SkillsUSA will supplant Advisory Committees, industry visits, or feedback from employers who have hired graduates, the SkillsUSA guidelines for preparation for competition is very much like having a web designer in the room offering insight into what is of value to learn and how that knowledge should be applied.

Implications and Recommendations

According to a study by the ManpowerGroup (2012, p. 3), in 2011, 24% of employers reported that there was a lack of "technical competencies/hard skills…in both professional and skilled trades" in filling positions, compared to 33% reporting the same problem in 2012. While this negative upward trend of 9% may have several factors that impact the relationship between hiring and skills fit, SkillsUSA is diligently working to provide community colleges resources to inform them of the skills alignment that meets business and industry needs. The implication for community colleges is the need to maximize information resources that may be used in curricula development to educate students for the job skills in demand by the workforce. One of these important and timely resources is SkillsUSA.

Although this article has touted SkillsUSA as a viable source of information, it is not the only source of information. For example, *The League for Innovation in the Community College* or the *American Association for Community Colleges*—to name just a few—are excellent sources of information specific to improving community college graduation rates, student success, and other important issues. Notwithstanding, when community colleges utilize these national resources to capture and apply continuous improvement/student success best practices, adding the resources of SkillsUSA provides an additional layer of information that will also

support community college outcomes. What SkillsUSA brings to the student success and employability issue is that they offer national and state forums to measure these successes in the community college (and high schools). In other words, the feedback from workforce experts before and during competition is a direct correlation of how well prepared our students are for employment in specific areas of the global workplace.

Finally, this discussion is not for the purpose of promoting competition via SkillsUSA events. This article is intended to incite thought and action in the community colleges in the U.S. to consider—again—the need to realistically measure our successes by viable collaborative outcomes alongside final exams, lab projects, or grades. SkillsUSA offers this collaborative outcome in the form of state, national, and international competition. It is the feedback from these events—in combination with materials from SkillsUSA and other organizations as previously noted—that will maximize our national workforce to be competitive, skilled, and motivated in the global marketplace. While the skills gap may be controversial, i.e., is it real, does it exist, what can be done about it, etc., there is very little controversy to the goals and objectives of community college training and education. Those goals and objectives are to prepare our graduates to achieve gainful employment and become the future leaders of this nation. SkillsUSA is but one asset to achieve these goals—but it is an important asset that should be considered for review and application in the overarching goal to prepare the best workforce that we in the community college can prepare.

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