

SkillsUSA in the Community College: A Significant Workforce Development Partner



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by Ken Scott, Charlene B. Anderson, and Rosa M. Miles

SkillsUSA is a partnership of students, teachers, and industry working together to ensure America has a skilled workforce. SkillsUSA helps all students excel in their training programs and future technical, skilled, and service careers, including health occupations. Nationally, SkillsUSA serves more than 300,000 high school and college/postsecondary students and their chapter advisors who are professional members. (SkillsUSA, 2011)

Gone Fishing...For Life

We've all heard the adage: Give a person a fish and you feed that person for a day; teach a person to fish and you feed that person for a lifetime. In our field, we could put it this way: Give a student all the knowledge that student can possibly obtain and retain, never demonstrate the application of the information, and the student will flounder for a day or possibly a lifetime. Take a student into the world of work, where practice is as common as breathing, and you pique that student's developmental curiosity for a lifetime. It's a simple axiom, but a potential lifelong outcome in practice.

The amount of study and research conducted on the value and purpose of the community college is equivalent to the dreams of technologists for terabyte storage on laptops, Kindles, or iPads. While the community college has been in existence since the 1800s and continues to be a topic of national influence, today's economic and global forces have created a renewed awareness that we must better understand the needs of the workforce (AMA, 2010; Conference Board, 2006; Harvard University, 2011; NAM, 2005, 2011). As noted by the National Association of Manufacturers in their October 2011, report, *A Manufacturing Renaissance: Four Goals for Economic Growth*:

The United States must develop a skilled workforce that includes the best talent from inside and outside the country. World-class manufacturing demands world-class talent. Our workforce must be proficient in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and must possess the skills that manufacturers seek. (NAM, 2011, p. 9)

A corollary point is made by Blythe and Sweet (2010, p.1):

To foster creativity in our students we must develop a process by which to coax that creative impulse from them, and then shape it in discipline-specific ways. That process necessitates our students learning certain skills key to creativity, skills often not taught in traditional classrooms [or in online classes].

Moreover, research conducted by Harvard University adds the following insight into workforce development:

Focusing more precisely on future employer demand illuminates part of the challenge, but there's also a problem at the supply end of the equation. Increasingly, U.S. employers complain that today's young adults are not equipped with the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century workforce. In 2006, the *Conference Board* and three other organizations issued, *Are They Ready to Work?* Based on a survey of several hundred employers, the report concluded that "Far too many young people are inadequately prepared to be successful." The authors were especially scathing regarding high school graduates, concluding that more than half were "deficient" in such skills as oral and written communication, critical thinking and professionalism. *The Partnership for 21st Century Skills*, whose members include such companies as Microsoft, Apple, Cisco and Pearson, has been equally critical of what it sees as obsolete and outmoded approaches to education, and is calling for more focus on the development of such "21st century skills" as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and communication. (Harvard, 2011, p. 4)

While these and other studies identified a potential problem in the development of fundamental and outcomes-based workforce skills, SkillsUSA offers a wide range of activities to counter these deficiencies. SkillsUSA brings to the community college a methodology to support the development of (a) community and workforce leaders; (b) a skilled workforce; and (c) individuals who have improved soft-skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. SkillsUSA is a significant workforce development partner that directly supports the explicit student success outcome of teaching students to fish for themselves—for a lifetime. How is this accomplished?

SkillsUSA-Trenholm

For several years prior to the academic year of 2009-2010, H. Council Trenholm State Technical College participated in VICA, a precursor to SkillsUSA. The overall involvement in the VICA program at the time was specific to certain programs. Two years ago, Trenholm State became heavily involved in the SkillsUSA national and state competitions leading to a renewed interest in the developmental principles of SkillsUSA. These principles include, but are not limited to, a student body organization with faculty advisors that prepares students for three main outcomes: (1) develop a leadership team spirit to accomplish goals; (2) prepare for state and national competitions; and, (3) prepare for in-field employment based on workforce requirements generated by practitioners in their respective fields.

What this renewed interest and participation in SkillsUSA did for the college was to infuse industry and business-generated materials and resources that were provided by SkillsUSA to prepare for competition. However, the first priority was not competition, but student success in learning outcomes and preparation for the workforce. Because of the involvement in SkillsUSA, the program offerings were better able to align themselves with skills sought by employers. (View the programs that were tested in the 2011 National Competition in Kansas City, Missouri, [here](#).)

Community college leaders and faculty members are primarily interested in SkillsUSA not so much for its trappings, but because it functions much like a liaison between the workforce and the community colleges that serve the national interest of skills development. These outcomes also apply to high school student skills development. If our colleges review the skills required by the workforce using materials provided by SkillsUSA, course offerings and outcomes would be better aligned with real-time skills sought by the workforce. In fact, if the community college leadership would think of SkillsUSA as a significant workforce partner, alignment of instructional practices would be more attuned to the current needs of the workforce.

In the past two-years, SkillsUSA-Trenholm has used published materials from SkillsUSA to enhance curricula offerings within specific programs. These published materials detail the explicit skills needed for state and national competitions; of greater importance, however, is that the detailed listings of skills needed to compete at the state and national levels are the precise skills that

students should have acquired to obtain and maintain gainful, lifelong employment. SkillsUSA-Trenholm has determined that the information provided by the SkillsUSA system is invaluable for improved levels of student outcomes in a majority of its college program offerings.

Implications and Recommendations

SkillsUSA is a supplement, not a substitute. Several information methods are necessary to ensure that program offerings align themselves with the hard and soft skill needs of the workforce. It is recommended that each respective community college have an established practice to understand local, national, and global workforce requirements. By using local advisory committees as well as other sources of workforce development requirements, curricula offerings better align with skills development. SkillsUSA is a significant workforce development partner because SkillsUSA is proactively involved in collecting and promulgating local, national, and global materials to directly and indirectly impact successful student skills outcomes relevant to workforce needs. SkillsUSA is a significant informational resource that impacts student learning outcomes, supporting student success rather than supplanting all other workforce development or community college resources. However, it is a resource that should not be overlooked.

Leadership, skills, and community service. The charge for membership for students and faculty members is minimal, currently \$13.00 per year. As a member of a local chapter, students have access to materials that will help them with information about the workforce, including competitions, student leadership, and specific areas of development. For example, SkillsUSA-Trenholm prepares and distributes a yearly tentative schedule of student activities. These activities include monthly community service opportunities, nationally published skills required for all programs, leadership team items for individual and group participation, and a structured agenda for preparation at the state and national competitions. In combination, SkillsUSA-Trenholm provides several opportunities for students—and faculty—to develop skills, interact with local workforce partners, support and develop community service projects, initiate leadership objectives and projects, and prepare for the workforce in terms of both soft skills and in-field skills.

Significant Workforce Development Partnerships. One of the most important features of the SkillsUSA program is the handshake opportunities between the college and the workforce. SkillsUSA-Trenholm has developed and continues to develop partnerships and sponsorships between SkillsUSA-Trenholm and many of the organizations within the college's service area. These partnerships between the college and area business and industry enable students to gain first-hand knowledge of skills information and employer expectations. With this information applied to student learning outcomes in real time, our students are better prepared to seek and hold gainful employment.

A Final Word

SkillsUSA-Trenholm is open to all students and all faculty members. Faculty members may volunteer to become advisors for student development once they join, and advisory outcomes are strictly voluntary. Students who voluntarily join the program have the option to participate as they have time, and students may choose to prepare for state and national competition, join a community service group, or become involved in other activities. For faculty, SkillsUSA is an excellent information resource guide for student success and college program improvements.

SkillsUSA doesn't replace professional development for faculty, nor does it reduce the intensity of educating students. Instead, SkillsUSA provides a concentrated set of skills requirements that students must know in order to effectively and successfully compete in the job search. When our students travel to Kansas City to compete, they compete as if they are at a worksite, participating in on-the-job, performance-based outcomes at a level that is required in real-time by employers across the United States.

For example, in the national competition of 2010-2011, the web design team had to perform an interactive original design that met the requirements of an employer/customer located somewhere in the United States, complete the work in two days, and have the work evaluated by professionals located somewhere between the East Coast and West Coast. The evaluation process demanded the employee meet the customer demands in a professional manner worthy of the price the customer would pay for the product or service. The students competed against one another as if they were employees working toward a business objective, not simply as students in a national competition. SkillsUSA creates this competitive environment so that students, faculty, and employers can meet and compete face to face, with workforce requirements designed by business partners and organizations. These workforce requirements demand that the student possess the skills needed in each area of work precisely aligned to the expectations of an employee.

[Ken Scott](#) is Senior Instructor for Computer Information Systems and Director for CISCO Networking Academy/SkillsUSA-Trenholm at H. Councill Trenholm State Technical College; [Charlene B. Anderson](#) is Student Activities Staff Assistant, SkillsUSA Leadership Team; [Rosa M. Miles](#) is Secretary, Educational Talent Search.

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