

*Soft-Skills in the Community College:
What are they really, who really cares, and what to do about them?*

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"An optimist is someone who goes after Moby Dick in a rowboat and takes the tartar sauce with him." --**Zig Ziglar**

Abstract

While this article pertains to soft-skills in the community college, its applicability is holistic across every student learning outcome in the two-year college system across the nation, with significant implications for four-year colleges and universities. The purpose in this article is not to overwhelm the reader with statistical significance, but to inform and push the envelope of discussion towards prerequisite inclusion of soft-skills in the college classrooms of America, including the K-12 system. For the reader to assume that soft-skills or “critical skills required for business success” is assumed in the graduates of our high schools, colleges, and universities is to assume incorrectly. This article will probe these misconceptions and discuss the findings specific to reports, studies, and research by the workforce/business community and other pertinent materials that address the direct and indirect topic of soft-skills.

Prologue

It is 5:20PM on a Monday and I am at the front of the classroom casually talking to students before my 5:30PM class is to begin. I wait until 5:30PM to ‘officially’ start the class with some light hearted group conversation as I validate attendance. At 5:34PM, 5:39PM, and 5:41PM, respectively, three students knock on the door (I lock the door @ 5:30:00PM). An assignment is due upon arrival and two of these three individuals bring no assignment, nor do they apologize to the class for their tardiness or interruptions. A few students ask for extensions of the same assignment, while three other students make various comments on how the team

project is not progressing as expected. [...the next day...] I am attending a Workforce Advisory meeting in which business leaders have graciously taken from their schedules and agreed to come on-site and review the Degree Plan or Program of Study, including our corresponding teaching-learning practices and student learning outcomes procedures. One of the faculty members does not show up, doesn't call, and the next time you see him, he never even mentions the meeting. Whether these student or employee events are atypical or suggest a lack of personal or professional soft-skills, the end result is the same: unacceptable. As Rod Serling would say, "*You've just entered the Twilight Zone.*"

Soft-skills in the workplace, anyone?

According to Eric Davis (2009) of *HRWorld*, businesses don't necessarily prefer the term soft-skills to define what employees should have in the workplace; rather, they prefer the term "critical skills required for business success", noting that 83 percent of higher-performing companies use this terminology. The characteristics or specific items within the critical skills required for business success generally included teamwork and the role of leaders, coaching, time management, listening, verbal and written communication, and project management. Additionally, in her article, *Strengthening Students' Communication and Collaboration Skills*, Joanne M. Lozar Glenn (2011), a writer for The National Business Education Association, identified four similar critical skills required for business success: critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. These critical skills have been dubbed the 4Cs. She noted that three out of every four employers in a study by the American Management Association and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills specifically stated that the 4Cs/critical skills will become even more important to their organizations in the next three to five years than at any time in the past.

Davis (2009) also cited a 4-part recommendation from the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), the world's largest private network of corporations focused on improving workforce productivity. These 4 items were: (1) Define the soft skills that are of greatest value to your organization. Look at highly effective employees and see what makes them good at what they do. Label such skills as "professional development training" or "communication skills training" if you want to avoid the 'soft-skills stigma'; (2) Establish an internal champion at the executive level. Since measurement can be elusive, it's best to have somebody who recognizes the innate value of the skills without the need to "prove" value; (3) Measure what you can; 360° feedback can help zero in on individual needs, and climate surveys may help an organization get a feeling for communication effectiveness, management competency, and teamwork. Metrics can be tied to the compensation of managers; and (4) focus on the competencies most critical to your organization's or department's success. In some cases, teamwork will be the key. In other cases, time management or written communication will be more important. Look at your performance needs and then prioritize accordingly. As an aside, these are the same types of questions community colleges should be addressing to prepare students in the soft-skills arena.

Whether the idea of employee effectiveness is labeled soft-skills or "critical skills required for business success", the end result is about the performance of employees in the organization. Let me add a caveat to this discussion before proceeding: this article is *not* addressing the counter-consideration of how organizations are responsible to their employees—that is a separate issue and one that *must* be addressed in our global economy, e.g., "offshoring", "downsizing", "RIF Policies", and the Holy Grail—Tenure (as well as other college, business and/or corporate practices). This article is in regards to the future workforce of this nation—generally, what critical skills do our graduates possess as they leave our high schools, colleges,

and universities; specifically, what critical skills do our community college graduates possess and to what degree?

While the critical skills required for business success of college graduates is of paramount and global importance, why should this topic merit consideration? Simply stated, educational institutions *are* a business function. Period. We are in the high-tech, high-end business of educating our future workforce for technical jobs, industry certifications, college transfer, community service, service in the professional fields, responsible citizenship, and state-of-the-art employee-ship. Does this mean that we professors, instructors, administrators, and support staff are free from the same discussion of inadequate soft-skills as suggested by the various workforce agencies that are reporting that students are lacking in these basic areas of critical skills required for business success? I'll leave that question for you to ponder as I move to the specific topic at hand.

Soft-skills in the classroom, anyone...anyone? What are they really and who cares?

Zig Zeigler, legendary motivation and performance trainer, once said that optimism is defined as someone that goes after Moby Dick and takes the tartar sauce with him. For those of us in community or technical college education, we need a healthy supply of tartar sauce in today's community college environment. This last statement has zero bearing on the myriad positive outcomes of two-year colleges—even in light of the 'new normal' that is buzzing the hallways and classrooms—nor does it negatively impact the fact that community colleges effectively and consistently serve close to half of the undergraduate students in the United States while funding has dwindled and continues to be a major issue (AACC, 2011). Nevertheless, while there are a plethora of issues that could be addressed in this article, let me deal with something that has been a different problem and is on the increase. That problem is the soft-

skills that students own when they arrive at our doors to begin work on a technical degree, prepare for college or university transfer, or to refurbish their existing/outdated skills in sundry areas for entry/reentry into the workforce.

The first item of discussion is to note that what is being discussed here is not that community colleges are favored over our colleague four-year colleges and universities, but that we in the community college have a significant open-door policy for students who are more likely to be in need of remedial coursework, are ill-prepared in sundry areas of need for college success, and may very well be in need of help with “critical skills required for business success”. Consequently, this article is not about what one community college writer has to say on the subject. Rather, this article is based on fact, statement, and research.

A crucial fact is simply that there is a skills gap in the U.S. To review the literature on the subject, it becomes self-evident that the skills gap has interconnected the technical and soft-skills boundaries. For example, the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) identified, then studied, this phenomenon: (1) they defined the skills gap as the significant difference between the organization’s current operational capabilities and the actual employee skills required to achieve its organizational goals, whether those skills are technical skills or soft-skills. The ASTD further defined the skills gap as the inflection point at which the organization was unable to maintain competitive advantage due to its inability to fill critical jobs with employees that possessed the right knowledge, skills and/or abilities; (2) they conducted research at 1,179 organizations, emphasizing that **79 percent** indicated that they presently have a skills gap within their respective organizations.

Additionally, there is a considerable amount of literature that identifies within the skills gap the need to improve the soft-skills of students. As noted by these articles, they identified

very specific items that students needed as part of their overall skill set. While the list of detailed skills varies by report or research, let it suffice to say that the literature suggested that students not only must possess good reading, writing, and mathematical skills (3Rs), they must also have a firm applied grasp of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4Cs). It was further stipulated that the 3Rs and the 4Cs, as well as the technical skills, were fundamental organizational priorities for employee development, talent management, succession planning, and progressive competitive advantage within their organizations. Harvard University (2011) stated it this way:

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. (p. 4)

Glenn (2011) suggested that in order to initiate processes to develop the critical skills required for business success, colleges must merge the technical skills with the critical skills so that competence and credibility—that is, state-of-the-art employee-ship—become a core component of student learning outcomes. In particular, she had the following comment on the subject:

Employers are calling for a workforce that can help grow, not just maintain, their businesses...noting that communication and collaboration skills in particular are especially important in what industry insiders are calling 'the distributed workforce'—team members who are located in different physical or geographical spaces, often distributed around the globe...the four-C [4Cs: critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration] skills are add-ons to the basic literacy employers have always required [reading, writing, math: the 3Rs], but they're *critical* [emphasis added] add-ons...they're priorities for employee development, talent management, and succession planning in their organizations. (p. 8)

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, 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].” This point—that we need to foster creativity by developing a set of practices to coax the creative impulse from them to shape the student learning outcomes—is the heart and soul of adding the soft-skills to our teaching strategies. In other words, as community college faculty members, it is imperative that we create a skill set for our future workforce that is no longer delineated by the terms of ‘technical skills’ and ‘soft-skills.’ We must promote the vision that our students graduate or complete their individual objectives by possessing the “critical skills required for business success”, and these critical skills are an official part of their individual Plan of Study. Does this mean that we now have to add soft-skills to the curriculum? The short answer is: yes. The long answer is: yes. The imbedded answer is, what option do we have?

The workforce is telling us that we need to do a better job of preparing students for the workforce in terms of the critical skills. As indicated by the American Society of Training and Development, 79 percent of the organizations surveyed stated unequivocally that they have a skills gap in their organization. To promote a new paradigm for the U.S. workforce, the National Association of Manufacturers in their October 2011 report, *A Manufacturing Renaissance: Four Goals for Economic Growth*, identified four definitive goals: (1) The United States will be the best place in the world to manufacture and attract foreign direct investment; (2) The United States will expand access to global markets to enable manufacturers to reach the 95 percent of consumers who live outside our borders; (3) Manufacturers in the United States will have the workforce that the 21st-century economy requires; and, (4) Manufacturers in the United States

will be the world's leading innovators. Specifically targeting a trained workforce, this report also strongly emphasized the following: "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).

As indicated by Martha J. Kanter, Undersecretary of Education, (2011, p. 3), of great concern to the educational system is that schools and postsecondary institutions must ensure that the students of America receive a high-quality education that prepares them for the workforce, as well as to succeed in and complete college. She further added that the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2010) published the results of its Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). These findings established a benchmark of how well the next-generation is prepared to function in the global workforce. The test measured skills and knowledge, but they also measured higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills critical in today's information-rich age, e.g., the ability to reason, to analyze, and to communicate (OECD, 2010). In several categories, American students ranked 'average' or worse among 34 developed nations.

President Obama has indicated in his *American Graduation Initiative* that he desires to have 5 million community college degrees and certificates by 2020 and new steps to ensure that those credentials will help graduates get ahead in their careers. As the President noted (Obama, 2010), "Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy.

It's time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future.”

Precisely what President Obama stated is the need to establish a paradigm shift in our thinking that soft-skills are not within the educational purview of the community college system. The workforce has provided the impetus for change in their reports and research. This information has been provided to the community colleges for action. It is imperative that community colleges act now to produce the additional 5 million community college degrees or certificates. However, imbedded in the skill-sets of these 5 million completers must be the full set of technical and soft-skills to meet the needs of the workforce, e.g., the critical skills required for business success.

When the question was posed at the beginning of this section in terms of who cares about the critical skills required for business success, how about these 5 million completers if the workforce views their critical skills for business success as deficient? And if community colleges have a pivotal role to play in the preparation of the 5 million completers, should we not be the champions of this necessity to meet the soft-skill needs of the 5 million completers? What if we were only successful at the 50th percentile mark in preparing these students? That's 2.5 million ready-to-work employees who possess the technical and critical skills needed to move this nation forward and be strategically and globally competitive among the 37 industrialized nations of this planet! What if this became a national movement in every two-year college, even if we had to restructure our curricula? Is that beyond the capacity of the community college system to accomplish? I think that we in the community colleges are up to the challenge! Consequently, the soft-skills—by definition—are critical assets to organizations and respective bottom-lines. Who really cares about these fluffy, esoteric touchy-feely soft-skills? Employers...care!

What can we do to ‘mandate’ the soft-skills of our future graduates?

Before proceeding, I want to offer a table provided by Glenn (2011). This table indicates the shifts in the 20th Century business and learning paradigms as compared to the 21st Century business and learning paradigms. The critical point about the information in this listing is that as we in the community college, as well as the nation, are undergoing changes in our educational outcomes whether due to economic forces, workforce concerns, or our own vision of educating the future workers of the nation, how much is our college, curricula or our own individual and collective teaching-learning strategies changing?

Have we noticed a shift in students’ soft-skills outcomes, or more specifically, their “critical skills required for business success?” For example, has their ability to work in teams improved, remained the same, or not been evaluated at the same level of outcome as that expected by the workforce? How about our students’ communication skills, specifically their ability to write effectively? Would you say that as an instructor in the community college, regardless of your field of professional practice, your students are able to write at a level of peer-reviewed quality in terms of writing technical reports, safety guides, or just a simple and short applied research-based paper? Would we in the community college consider our students and future workforce participants to be highly trained and educated in both the technical and critical skills to be competitive in the global workforce? In short, if we are responding in negative terms or at a minimum in non-affirmative terms, we have some work to do to bring the critical skills required for business success into the classroom. Better yet, we have to ensure that our students are proficient in their soft-skills at a level that is acceptable to the workforce. Not only is it our duty to get them ready, it is our responsibility to demonstrate these critical skills before them.

How can we hold them responsible if we are not being models of these critical skills in our own institutions?

Take a look at Table 1 and judge for yourself the validity of this information as a change-agent in the local community college to address these rightful demands by the workforce. For every set of technical skills, there must be a set of corresponding soft-skills. Soft-skills may not be those that require study; they are the skills that are self-reporting—meaning that they must be self-motivated, self-responsible, and self-assessed—with an abundance of direction and practice in the classrooms, labs, projects, community projects, and so on. If these critical skills are missing or misaligned in terms of individual outcomes, we must find ways, methods, and structure to build these critical skills in our students.

Table 1 *Shifts in Business and Learning Paradigms*

20 TH CENTURY	21 ST CENTURY
<i>BUSINESS PARADIGMS</i>	
Pay for time	Pay for results
Work with things	Work with people
Choose occupation	Build a skills bank
Training/certification	Continuous learning
People <i>or</i> technology skills	People <i>and</i> technology skills
Functional job descriptions, narrow expertise	Evolving job descriptions, “versatile” employees
Work hard	Adapt to change
Gain seniority	Be a competent team member
You go where the work is (place based)	Work can come to you (telecommuting)
Knowledge, information	Wisdom, emotional intelligence
<i>LEARNING PARADIGMS</i>	
Memorize	Know, think, do
Textbook	Research
Passive	Active
Work alone	Work with others
Teacher centered	Student centered
Siloed curriculum	Integrated curriculum
Evaluation by teacher	Evaluation by self, peer, “real world”

Source: Glenn, J. (2011). Strengthening students’ communication and collaboration skills. *Business Education Forum*, 65(3), 6-13, p. 10.

Glenn (2011, pp. 8-12) identified several successful approaches to how we might ‘mandate’ these critical skills in the lives of our students, e.g., the future workforce of America, possibly even the global workforce. I will identify each of these and describe briefly what each entails.

1) *Be cognizant that nothing is too basic.* The idea here is to use our classrooms on occasion as if they are the boardroom or an on-the-job-site. For example, when students arrive, shake their hand and welcome them, demonstrating that a firm handshake is about practicing workplace etiquette. Glenn and others note that this practice is not to patronize students, but to proactively demonstrate that this skill is but one of many fundamental communication skills needed in an organization, which is to say that students must be able “to look an employer in the eye, offer a firm handshake, and introduce themselves with confidence” – regardless of the field of study they are preparing to enter.

2) *Help students separate the communication process into distinct manageable parts.* To build a reliable set of communications skills, students must think in terms of how this will be done in actual practice. Whether they are considering a verbal or written presentation, the process is to enable students to understand two factors: (a) the purpose, audience, content and media; and, (b) organization and professional format for the communication itself. Applied to any class, if students understand this process, they are much more likely to be prepared to give these critical skills reports and presentations once they are “on the job.” In other words, this skill should not be learned once the new employee begins work, it should be learned as part of required student learning outcomes.

3) *Teach students business writing, not academic report writing.* The crux of this recommendation for developing critical skills is to help students develop the process of presenting to a boss or before the Board of Directors. In other words, “students should be

trained in how to use technology to mesh effective page layout and design, color combinations, and how text and graphics support each other.” This idea is not to create graphics designers, but to give them the basic skills on how to create a report that includes professionalism, creativity, and effective communications. These skills are not limited to academic programs; these business writing skills applies to any field of work that requires reports to be made to management for company improvement.

4) *Spend the time teaching students how to be effective collaborators.* The premise in this argument is simple: don’t just put students in teams and hope for the best...*teach* them what it means to function as a team, show them by analysis of team outcomes what team dynamics mean to a successful team, and emphasize that teamwork is one of the major skills employers will require. This effort, as noted by Glenn and others, can be accomplished in chunks; but it is those chunks that together create a synergy of how teams and individuals can become effective collaborators and significantly influence the bottom line in their respective organizations. Stated differently, the idea is to create an effective team by helping them “to discover what they learned about themselves as collaborators, how they can improve their own collaborative skills, and how then can support the effective dynamics of a group process.”

5) *Remember the value of project-based learning assignments to develop real-world communication and collaboration skills.* The statement says it all: “This instructional design is relevant, involves higher-level thinking skills, and is fun. Plus, it’s active vs. passive learning, real-world research driven vs. text-book driven, and working collaboratively rather than in isolation.” Linkage here is in the operative word: value. What value do we annotate for our students in this process? Do we prepare students to understand the value of project-based learning in the real world, and enable them to understand that in the real-world, communication

and collaboration skills are not multiple-choice items on the Employment Application Form. These skills create opportunities for acquiring the job, and once employed, these skills place individuals on the track of advancement.

6) *Use Web 2.0 tools for practicing communication and collaboration simultaneously.* The idea here is to use the technologies to develop skills sought by employers. For example, “employers are calling for a workforce that can help grow, not just maintain, their businesses...noting that communication and collaboration skills in particular are especially important in what industry insiders are calling ‘the distributed workforce’—team members who are located in different physical or geographical spaces, often distributed around the globe.” What more can I say?

7) *Consider gaming software for practicing collaboration and consensus-building skills.*

The last method suggested for mandating soft-skills in the classroom is to consider the processes used when students engage in creating gaming software or applets to competitively participate in the process. What is learned here, according to the *Washington Post* is that “advocates argue that games teach vital skills overlooked in the age of high-stakes tests, such as teamwork, decision making, and digital literacy.”

While these 7 items are a starting point to initiate a set of soft-skills in the classroom—and in the character of students—they are guidelines. There are innovative approaches to developing the soft-skills of our students; we in the community college just need to step up and develop them as well as use them in our labs, lectures, and as a holistic approach to student learning outcomes. If we were to establish the practice that our students must fulfill their course objectives with the soft-skills so entrenched in the work that they completed the course work as if it were normal to work in teams, complete assignments on time, find solutions to problems they were having, seek help from their instructors from the perspective of collaborative learning, and so forth—imagine how the Prologue might have ended. See the Epilogue below:

Epilogue

It is 5:20PM on a Monday and I am at the front of the classroom casually talking to students before my 5:30PM class is to begin. I wait until 5:30PM to ‘officially’ start the class with some light hearted group conversation as I validate attendance. There was a time I locked the door to avoid interruptions, but this is only the 3rd time a student has been late since the semester began some weeks ago. He arrived at 5:39PM, apologized to the class for being late and interrupting, and set his assignment on the desk—which was due at today’s class. The team leaders of the semester projects wanted to take about three-to-five minutes each to update the class on their respective status. We had a good class and the overwhelming majority, I am confident, will be major contributors to their workplace and to their communities. [...the next day...] I am attending a Workforce Advisory meeting in which business leaders have graciously taken from their schedules and agreed to come on-site and review the Degree Plan or Program of Study, including our corresponding teaching-learning practices and student learning outcomes procedures. One of the faculty members was called to a minor emergency. He called to express his regrets and sent a copy of his questions for the Workforce Advisory members.

Final Words

You may be saying, “Okay, you want us to believe that we can create nirvana in our colleges and classrooms!” I’m not that naïve, but the litmus test is simple: “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Unless we stir the soft-skills waters to make waves, soft-skills advancement will never materialize as prerequisite student learning outcomes. I don’t think it’s nirvana we are after: we as a community college system are after the best educated, prepared, and civic minded graduates that the workforce has yet seen. Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more: *soft-skills in the community college: what are they, what can we do about them, and who cares?*

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