

## Engaging Competency-Crossing (Soft) Skills in IFP Curricula

### Abstract

Institutions of higher education have always committed themselves to developing and pursuing discipline-based skills (i.e. hard skills) and content knowledge that meet ever-changing professional demands. Business surveys have historically shown that employers place a high priority on graduates with these skills. In the past few decades, survey results began to indicate an increasingly growing demand among employers for graduates with basic soft-skills (e.g., written communication, critical thinking, and mathematical reasoning). Institutions have responded to these demands by redesigning courses and programs to include these skills. More recent results indicate that employers have expanded their requirements to include additional soft-skills such as leadership qualities, ability to work within the dynamic of a group, oral presentation skills, research skills, the ability to work within a timeframe, and the capacity to engage in general problem solving. Results show that students who have developed a skills-oriented vocabulary have increased their success in the hiring process, and are better equipped to progress in their profession. At FAU, some programs have been revised to address this expansion. For example, Direct Independent Research (DIR) and Research Intensive (RI) course designations were recently institutionalized and courses earning this designation must include several soft-skills as actual student learning outcomes. While courses like these were redesigned to formally address and measure soft-skills, the fact is many courses are already providing students with soft-skill opportunities. The challenge then is to articulate these skills through the course syllabi, and within the existing lessons and class assignments. A straightforward solution is for faculty to map soft-skills to specific existing assignments, delineate them in their syllabus, and communicate them to their students during the learning experience or assignment. This requires little effort and no revisions to existing lessons or assignments. Stressing the use and importance of these skills throughout the course promotes awareness by students of their progress in developing these proficiencies. This paper will discuss the importance of soft-skill development, and identify minimally intrusive ways to articulate and promote soft-skills in IFP curricula. We will examine an example of a faculty mapping exercise and identify ways faculty can revise their syllabi and stress soft-skill development in their courses.

## Background

The concept of soft-skills developed in the literature as psychological or social traits necessary to personal and social well-being. Some saw soft skills as belonging to two major groups: interaction skills and motivation skills (Moss & Tilly, 2001). In the early nineties, the World Health Organization identified the following healthy life skills: “decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, communication skills, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, and coping with stress” (WHO, 1993). Globally, programs were launched to support competencies that lead to a “personally and socially worthwhile life” as defined by experts in disciplines such as: anthropology, economics, philosophy, psychology and sociology (see OECD, 2009).

As the workplace became more globalized, these skills became more central to effective professional performance. This resulted in selecting and refining soft-skill outcomes that would be of importance to employers. Employer survey results began indicating an increasingly growing demand for graduates to possess what were considered the three basic soft-skills (i.e., written communication, critical thinking, and mathematical reasoning). Institutions responded to these demands by redesigning many courses and programs to include these skills as student learning outcomes. At FAU, for example, communication and critical thinking make up two of the three core program learning outcomes. The other is the “hard-skill” of content knowledge and skills. All departments must submit yearly program reports that require data on student learning performance in each these areas. Further, courses at FAU that receive Directed Independent Research (DIR) or Research Intensive (RI) designations must provide evidence that communication and critical thinking are included as measurable learning outcomes. The definition of critical thinking has even been disaggregated into types (e.g., creating critical inquiry, analysis of data, interpretation). However, soft-skill requirements have evolved and universities should adapt to these changes in the same way as they adapt to the advances in their field.

Recent survey data provides up-to-date evidence of which soft-skills are currently coveted by employers, and how soft-skill needs changed over time. One of the largest periodic studies is sanctioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU). A survey conducted by Hart Research Associates (2018) on behalf of the AACU, sampled business executive and hiring managers. The purpose of the survey was to determine the college learning outcomes respondents thought were most important for success in their company, and the degree to which they believed universities prepared graduates in these areas. Most executives and hiring managers reported that colleges and universities needed to make improvements in preparing graduates with the soft-skills needed for workplace success upon entry into a position, and for success in advancement. More importantly, respondents placed a high priority on hiring graduates who possessed skills and knowledge that cut across majors. Specifically, the learning outcomes that executives and hiring managers rated the most important were “oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, working independently, self-motivation, written communication, and real-world application of skills and knowledge.” “Real world application” was operationalized by results to an open survey question to mean “analytical skills regardless of profession.” These same respondents also saw “recent college graduates as underprepared in the skills and knowledge areas that they deem most important,” Only 40% of the executives rated recent graduates as being well-prepared in oral communication, which was the quality they prioritized most highly at 80%. Emerging from their longitudinal analysis, they found 4-year increases in the level of importance respondents placed on a graduate’s ability to “analyze and solve problems with people from

different backgrounds and cultures” (+9%), and “locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources” (+5%). Additional surveys have mirrored the AACU study. For example, an online Harris Poll conducted on behalf of CareerBuilder (2019), sampled 1,023 employers and found that 92% said soft-skills would be important in making hiring decisions. Further, 80% of respondents said that “soft skills would be equally or more important than hard skills when hiring candidates.” The top soft-skills considered in the hiring process according to employers were ability to be team-oriented (51%), attention to detail (49%), and customer service (46%).

Over the years, numerous studies have raised concerns about the ability of universities and colleges to close the gap between the demands of a mobile, global work environment and graduates’ skills (King, 2003; Yunus & Li, 2005; Mourshed, Farrell & Barton, 2012). Graduates often lack the ability to organize, adapt and strategically apply their specific skills to new situations and circumstances (Bridgstock, 2009). Soft skills have evolved beyond the basic skills of communication and critical thinking. Skills that are crucial to employability are increasingly becoming transferable skills that are common to almost all complex endeavors and apply across all fields.

Being proficient in soft-skills is beneficial to our graduates in a variety of ways. Deming (2015) found that employment growth was particularly strong in occupations that require high levels of social skills. High levels of “non-cognitive skills” (e.g., extroversion, extracurricular participation, and locus of control) were found to be important determinants of future wages (Deming 2015; Lindqvist & Vestman 2011; Waddell 2006). Considering that proficiency in non-cognitive skills predict college readiness, retention, and completion (Granger & Noguera, 2015), focusing on them within our courses seems to represent a multi-fold investment.

Institutions of higher education should continually revise soft-skills outcomes in the same manner as they traditionally do technical, job-specific and discipline-specific abilities. This paper will discuss the current scope of employer-desired soft skills and the role of the university in forming and developing them. Attention will be placed on methods to implement soft-skills in courses with minimal effort and little to no course redesign.

### **Scope of Soft-Skills in Higher Education**

As mentioned above, the soft-skills most prized by employers are (from the AACU and Career Builder Surveys):

- oral communication
- critical thinking
- ethical judgment
- working effectively in teams
- working independently
- self-motivation
- written communication
- real-world application of skills and knowledge

The FAU Career Center uses the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) eight career readiness competencies that they identified through employer surveys as most often sought in

future employees. They provide students with a worksheet to measure their strengths and weaknesses on these skills (Appendix A). These soft-skills are:

- Professionalism/Work Ethic
- Team Work/Collaboration
- Oral and Written Communication
- Leadership
- Global/Intercultural Fluency
- Critical Thinking
- Career Management

Other soft-skills identified in the literature include, but are not limited to:

- Eye contact and body language
- Punctuality
- Clarity
- Confidence
- Empathy
- Listening skills
- Friendliness
- Diplomacy

### Implementing Soft-Skills at FAU

Many instructors at FAU already incorporate soft-skills into their courses, even though they may not be articulated to students or evaluated for grades. Therefore, the most straightforward approach is to simply have faculty articulate these skills in their syllabi (e.g., course description, class assignments), and to stress them during lessons. But, what can the institution do to promote or expand this process? Below, we will identify essential campus stakeholders, and describe how they may be tasked in this initiative.

Core Curriculum Committee (CCC). The CCC creates, maintains, and enforces policy and procedures for the IFP program and its courses. They would be the initial administrative authority to review, recommend, and take action on a soft-skills initiative. Specifically, they could:

- **Identify the soft-skills of interest.** Refine the scope of soft-skills and emphasize those that would be more adaptable and beneficial to the IFP program.
- **Develop a workable implementation plan with departments and colleges.** Who and how will we communicate this initiative to the colleges and departments? How do we advocate for their inception into IFP courses? What are ways faculty could emphasize soft-skills in courses with large enrollments? What resources do faculty need? What IFP policies need to be changed, if any? Will these be monitored (e.g., through an analysis of IFP course syllabi)?
- **Identify campus partners.** Identify other areas on campus that may be leveraged to provide information, training or awareness.



Academic Success Initiatives (ASI).

The ASI office could contribute to the initiative in the following ways:

- **Promote soft-skills resources on the ASI website.** Include ideas and examples of how people in different disciplines could incorporate soft skills in their courses. Work with departments or colleges in identifying examples of using these skills in discipline-specific ways, in courses with large enrollments, or that are online.
- **Link to the Career Center.** The FAU Career Center uses the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) eight career readiness competencies identified by employers as most often sought in future employees. Provide links to the Career Center page on NACE's eight career readiness competencies.

Career Center

The Career Center provides essential tools and information to help students become marketable. They could further assist in the process by:

- **Encouraging faculty to employ Career Center student preparation tools.** The NACE worksheet could be used by faculty to raise student awareness of these skills. Students could track skill development as they progress through the semester. The Career Center could market this tool and other related services to faculty for use in the classroom.
- **Identify Outside Resources.** Identify outside resources students can pursue to develop these skills on their own. Take advantage of video tutorials and self-help resources widely available online. Provide links to those that are successfully evaluated and deemed appropriate.

Course Faculty

- **Develop course maps.** Course maps (see Appendix B) are useful visual tools when designing or redesigning a course. A course map helps instructors align what they want students to learn with how they teach, and how they assess student performance. It is also a helpful way to clarify how they can communicate these elements to their students on the syllabus and during class assignments. Course maps can be compared between prerequisite and post-requisite courses to ensure there is continuous building of skills and knowledge within a course sequence. They are useful in faculty discussions about how courses meet overall program goals. They can also help faculty demonstrate how coursework meets multiple external requirements. For example, a course may need to include different learning outcomes for general education and for the writing intensive program, in addition to their program and accrediting outcomes. An additional column in the course map in Appendix B for each of these requirements affords faculty an opportunity to track all of these requirements. The course map is also useful in illuminating instances where a particular student learning outcome is not being addressed, or is not being addressed adequately. In addition, instructors can prioritize their learning targets to reflect program necessity, new developments in their field, or time demands that may affect the duration of the course. A thorough review of a completed course map can help faculty make adjustments to their course and increase the likelihood of achieving student learning outcomes.

- **Identify soft-skills on course syllabi.** Faculty can articulate soft-skills in their course descriptions, or in their course assignments. An example of this can be found in Appendix C.
- **Employ assignments that promote soft-skills.** Faculty can engage students in assignments that promote employment of soft-skills and problem-based approaches such as: “work teams, case studies, simulations, project works and presentations from the students” (B-HERT, 2002). The instructor could also assume multiple roles, such as mentor, facilitator and evaluator to demonstrate and model the utility of possessing these skills. They can go a step further and evaluate students on their soft-skill performances, and then provide feedback to students on how to improve deficiencies.
- **Use resources from the Career Center.** As mentioned above, the career center offers a soft-skill worksheet for students so that they can gauge their level of skill development, and determine curricular and co-curricular opportunities to enhance them. Faculty could use this worksheet within their courses to make students aware of how these skills are applied in the course, and how they may be important to their professional development.
- **FYE.** First-year experience courses address many of these soft-skills. Used as a diagnostic opportunity, student soft-skill proficiencies can be ascertained early so they can be aware of learning opportunities in future coursework. Coordinating between the FYE and subsequent course experiences would promote a sustained university effort.

## Summary

Soft-skills development already exists in the vast majority of our courses at FAU. There is little need to engage in any extensive efforts to redesign courses or programs. The easiest solutions are minimally intrusive and take little time and effort. For example, faculty can map their course outcomes, pedagogy, assignments and assessments to identify soft-skills that are already addressed in the course. They can revise their syllabus to make students aware of these skills, and stress their use during class activities and assignments. They can articulate why the skills are important, especially in their field of study. Faculty who want to be more proactive can revise course assignments to include these as learning outcomes and provide specific feedback to students about their proficiency levels. Promoting soft-skill development has many positive effects on student success in college, their competitiveness in the job market, and their future success as a professional. These benefits can be achieved with very little time and effort, thereby providing a good return on investment.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Career Center Soft-Skill Development Worksheet**

# **From College to Careers: Identify Your Soft-Skill Development**

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Prospective employers are looking for candidates who have developed relevant skills and personal qualities that add value to the work environment. Whether you have just begun your time as a college student or you are about to begin your job search, it is important to be aware of the soft skills you have developed and will continue to develop over time.

This process begins by reflecting on all of your experiences including: work experience, internships, academic work and co-curricular experiences. After you have evaluated your experiences, the next step is to come up with a plan on how you will continue to develop these skills.

Based on a survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), below are the 8 personal qualities/skills employers seek:

- Professionalism/Work Ethic
- Oral/Written Communication
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Digital Technology
- Leadership
- Global/Intercultural Fluency
- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving
- Career Management



FAU Career Center: [career@fau.edu](mailto:career@fau.edu) | 561-297-3533 | [fau.edu/career](http://fau.edu/career)**PROFESSIONALISM/WORK ETHIC**

- Demonstrate personal accountability and effective work habits  
(e.g., *punctuality, working productively with others, and time/workload management*)
- Understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image
- Demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior
- Act responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind
- Able to learn from his/her mistakes



	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			

**ORAL/WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

- Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms
- Public speaking skills
- Able to express ideas to others
- Can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports

	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			

**LEADERSHIP**

- Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals
- Use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others
- Assess and manage his/her emotions and those of others
- Use empathetic skills to guide and motivate others
- Organize, prioritize, and delegate work



	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			

**GLOBAL/INTERCULTURAL FLUENCY**

- Value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions
- Demonstrate openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences

	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			

**CRITICAL THINKING/PROBLEM SOLVING**

- Analyze issues
- Make decisions
- Overcome problems
- Obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data
- Demonstrate originality and inventiveness



	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			

**CAREER MANAGEMENT**

- Identify and articulate one's skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and career goals
- Identify areas necessary for professional growth
- Navigate and explore job options; Understand and able to take the steps necessary to pursue opportunities
- Understand how to self-advocate for opportunities in the workplace

	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			



### TEAMWORK/COLLABORATION

- Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers
- Able to work within a team structure
- Can negotiate and manage conflict

	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			



### DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

- Leverage existing digital technologies ethically and efficiently to solve problems
- Adaptable to new and emerging technologies
- Experience working with technology relevant to your career field

	Work Experience/ Internship	Academic Coursework/Project	Co-Curricular Activities (clubs, volunteering, etc.)
I have gained this skill through:			
I will continue to develop this skill by:			

## Appendix B

### Course Mapping Exercise Template for Instructors



<b>Assignment/ Lesson/Student Product</b>	<b>Associated Soft- skills</b>	<b>How communicated on syllabus</b>	<b>How stressed or assessed in class, on assignments, or student products</b>
<i>Ex. Presentation-Students will form groups and present on a course topic</i>	<i>Working within dynamic of group, oral presentation skills, research skills, critical thinking skills.</i>	<i>A description of the purpose of the presentation will include these soft skill outcomes.</i>	<i>The importance of these skills will be stressed when students are building their presentation. Feedback will be given to them during the revision process. Points will be given to each individual's presentation skills. A paper is required and critical thinking is formally evaluated and part of the total points.</i>



## Appendix C

### Sample Syllabus Entry

#### Identify Transferable Skills in Existing Curricula

<p>Sample Syllabus – English 111</p> <p><b>Presentation – 30%</b>  <i>Students will form groups and present on a course topic.</i></p> <p>Portfolio – 30%  <i>Students keep a journal to record reading, reflections, and experiences.</i></p> <p>Class Participation – 10%  <i>Students are expected to attend, be prepared, and actively participate.</i></p> <p>Final Exam – 25%  <i>Written exam taken in class at the end of the semester.</i></p>	 <p><b>Competencies Developed by Deans, Faculty, and Administrators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Working within the dynamic of a group</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Research skills</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Oral presentation skills</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Leadership skills</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to work within a set time frame</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Critical-thinking skills</li> </ul> <p>No course redesign necessary; faculty map existing lessons to professional competencies</p>
<p>Memorial U found that employers were more likely to interview students who discuss coursework in terms of <i>competencies</i> than subject matter or academic field </p>	