THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS IN ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT AND POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS:

Perspectives from Employers and Community Colleges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) is a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for people to support themselves and their families through living-wage careers. SJI offers low-income individuals training that leads to college credentials in growing local industry sectors. A hallmark of SJI's program is the integration of soft skills into our training curriculum. This grew largely out of early and ongoing communication to SJI by our employer partners that soft skills are the most important attribute – and the most difficult to find – among entry-level job applications. Outside of this evidence, however, SJI has only a limited base of research supporting the importance of soft skills to local employers.

The purpose of this research is to gain perspectives from employers and postsecondary administrators on soft skills priorities and deficiencies, assessment tools, and training practices. The findings will help SJI to improve its soft skills curriculum and promote the integration of soft skills training within the regional workforce development system. Below are the major findings from this soft skills research, which includes employer and community college surveys, interviews, and literature reviews.

SOFT SKILLS ARE AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT AS TECHNICAL SKILLS FOR ENTRY-LEVEL WORKERS

More than 75% of employers surveyed said that soft skills were as important as – or more important than – technical skills in securing entry-level employment. National surveys of employers reflect similar views, showing that in many cases soft skills are even more important than technical skills. Research on predicting the future career success of students supports employers' opinions that some soft skills are a better predictor of adult success (salaries, graduation rates, home ownership) than technical skills.

SOME SOFT SKILLS ARE CONSIDERED MORE CRITICAL – AND MORE LACKING – THAN OTHERS

Local employers rank professionalism/integrity, reliability, communication, and teamwork as the top soft skills priorities for entry-level employment. Conversely, creativity/innovation and self-direction were viewed as the least critical of soft skills.

The soft skills categories that are both high priorities for local employers and most lacking in job applicants are communication, problem solving/adaptability, and reliability. Communication was by far the most common skill lacking in job applicants as reported by 55% of employers surveyed.

THERE ARE KEY DIFFERENCES AMONG INDUSTRY SECTORS IN DESIRED SOFT SKILLS

Employers in all three sectors analyzed (healthcare, manufacturing, and office occupations) listed communication as a priority skill. However, in manufacturing, written communication appears to be less of a priority compared to the other industry sectors. Other notable differences include the following sector priorities:

- Manufacturing – teamwork, problem solving, and reliability;
- Healthcare – customer service skills and positive attitudes;
- Professional services – teamwork, professionalism, and organizational skills.

EMPLOYERS AND COLLEGES SOMEWHAT DIFFER IN THE SOFT SKILLS DEEMED MOST CRITICAL AND MOST LACKING

Both community college administrators and employers surveyed agreed that communication is the critical skill most lacking in students and job applicants. Professionalism/integrity and reliability skills were also ranked by both groups as priorities. There are three notable differences in priorities: writing is more important to community college administrators than to employers while verbal communication is less important; community colleges see more deficits in reliability and professionalism skills in students than employers see in job applicants; employers see more deficits in problem solving skills in job applicants than community colleges do in their students.

EMPLOYERS APPEAR WILLING TO PLAY ONLY A LIMITED ROLE IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The top response from employers regarding who is responsible for soft skills development was "employees themselves." Beyond the individual taking responsibility, about two-thirds (67%) of area

employers believe that the educational system has an important role in the development of soft skills. Half (54%) of the employers surveyed also stated that they are willing to play a role in soft skills development of their employees, but mostly on a case by case basis as opposed to fulfilling a formal training role.

BEST PRACTICES EXIST FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT & ASSESSMENT

These best practice guidelines around assessing and developing soft skills were compiled from research focused on four year colleges, community colleges, and workforce development organizations, as described in detail in this report. The framework is meant as a guide for community colleges and training organizations that incorporate soft skills training in their curriculums.

1. Set clear expectations regarding soft skills.
2. Incorporate soft skills in grading system and assessment process.
3. Practice continuously and provide feedback.
4. Incorporate real world situations and environments.
5. Encourage professional communication between students and their peers, faculty, and community.
6. Maintain a learning organization culture.

EMPLOYERS ARE CONTRADICTORY IN THEIR OPINIONS OF THE VALUE OF SOFT SKILLS CREDENTIALS

Results of this research indicate that employers value soft skills credentials, with 74% of respondents identifying that the development of a soft skills credential is an important task for community colleges and workforce development providers. However, when employers were asked about the impact such a credential would have on the job application process, only 46% stated that it would have a positive effect on the job applicant's chances of gaining entry-level employment.

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INTRODUCTION

Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) is a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for people to support themselves and their families through living-wage careers. SJI offers low-income individuals training that leads to college credentials in growing local industry sectors. SJI is continually seeking to improve its education and training programs by establishing meaningful employer partnerships. Through these partnerships, employers frequently communicate to SJI that soft skills are the most important attribute, and the most difficult to find, among entry-level job seekers/workers. A hallmark of SJI's program is the integration of soft skills into the training curriculum. Beyond the work of its Performance Skills Coalition[1], SJI has only a limited base of knowledge supporting the importance of soft skills to local employers.

The purpose of this research is to gain perspectives from employers and postsecondary administrators on soft skills priorities and deficiencies, assessment tools, and training practices. Data from both of these spheres (workplace and postsecondary schools) allow a determination of whether shared priorities exist across the workforce system with regard to soft skills.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON SOFT SKILLS

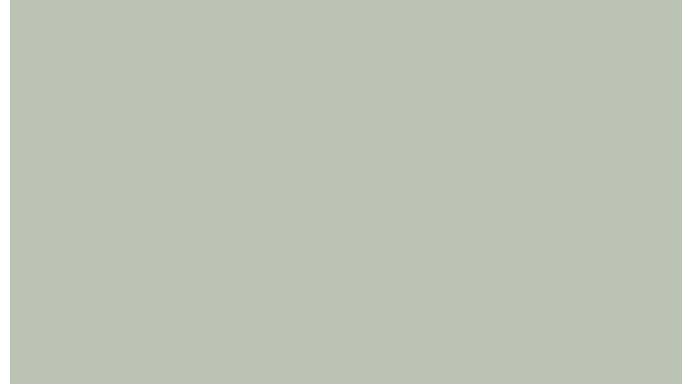**The main research questions for employers were:**

- Which soft skills are most critical for entry-level positions and which soft skills do they find most lacking in job applicants?

- How do employers assess and address soft skills deficiencies in entry-level employees and job applicants?

- How important are work readiness credentials to employers?

POSTSECONDARY ADMINISTRATOR PERSPECTIVES ON SOFT SKILLS

The main research questions for community college administrators were:

- How important are soft skills in successful completion of a college credential?

- How are community colleges and private vocational schools addressing soft skills?

- What are the results, if quantifiable, of including soft skills instruction within educational programs?

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1. SJI's Performance Skills Coalition is a group of Seattle-area employers that works closely with SJI to develop tools and best practices on employee performance (soft) skills and to find ways to integrate these into local employment and training programs.

This research project will improve SJI's Career Pathways program by informing SJI and its program partners on the most relevant soft skills and the best teaching methods for developing these.[2] From a systems perspective, the research will demonstrate the role of soft skills in the job application process (particularly for entry-level workers); the role of soft skills in college persistence success; and best practices in soft skills training. The findings will help SJI promote the integration of soft skills training within the regional workforce development system. Finally, the research explores the need for a soft skills credential or curriculum for local community college initiatives, such as the City of Seattle's *Pathways to Careers* project.[3]

This report identifies the importance of soft skills to employers, types of soft skills employers look for in entry-level employees, and skills that are lacking in entry-level applicants. The report then examines possible industry sector differences in soft skills, as well as soft skills comparisons between community colleges and employers.

Regarding soft skills development, the report describes employers' perspectives on which institutions have a role in helping entry-level workers gain these critical skills. The report then uses findings from a literature review to describe best practices concerning soft skills training in colleges and workforce development organizations. Various types of available soft skills assessment tools and credentials are also examined.

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2. Career Pathways provides linked short-term and longer-term training at area community colleges in four industry sectors: **Automotive**, **Healthcare**, **Office Occupations (BIT)**, and **Welding & Manufacturing**. The objective of Career Pathways is to help participants advance to a one- or two-year college credential that will provide them with excellent opportunities for a well-paying career in their chosen industry sector.

3. Pathways to Careers is a pioneering partnership comprised of businesses, educational institutions, government agencies, nonprofit organizations and labor to build educational pathways to middle-wage jobs.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this report derives from employer and community college surveys, interviews, and a review of soft skills research. SJI created two on-line surveys for employers and community college administrators, asking them questions about the importance of soft skills, specific soft skills priorities, and soft skills deficiencies. The questions for employers focused on entry-level employees and job applicants, allowing employers to define for themselves what constitutes "entry-level." Fifty local employers and seven community college administrators responded to the surveys.

While one objective of this study was to capture enough survey responses within each of SJI's four industry sectors of focus to complete a comparative sector analysis, sample sizes were not large enough for each particular sector. Instead, sector comparisons are based on five interviews SJI conducted with individual employers in SJI focused sectors (manufacturing, international trade/ logistics, healthcare, and office occupations), coupled with a literature review of sector specific research, with the exception of the international trade/logistics sector (no industry information on soft skills could be found for this sector). The literature review for the sector analysis portion of this report was not specific to entry-level positions because of the lack of research available.

Information regarding soft skills development best practices derives from studies in postsecondary education and workforce development literature, as well as community college surveys and two interviews with staff from the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council and Center for Excellence in Careers in Education. Best practice studies used for this report were selected in part due to their use of demographically diverse target populations (including racial, economic, and geographic indicators) or target populations that are similar to SJI's program participants.

FIGURE 1. Soft Skills Categories

Top Soft Skills Reported by Employers from Compilation of Research	Soft Skills Categories Used in SJI Research
Communication	Communication
Critical Thinking / Problem Solving	Problem Solving / Adaptability
Teamwork / Interpersonal	Teamwork / Interpersonal
Professionalism / Work Ethic	Professionalism / Integrity
Adaptability	Reliability
Decision-Making	Self-Direction
Self-Management / Self-Direction	Creativity / Innovation
Attitude / Enthusiasm	
Lifelong Learning	
Creativity / Innovation	
Coordination	
Leadership	

DEFINING SOFT SKILLS

Research from various sources, including Corporate Voices for Working Families, Michigan State University, and the Journal of Leadership Education concludes that employers look for roughly eleven categories of soft skills, listed in the left hand column above (**Figure 1**). The seven bolded soft skills are categories mentioned as priorities in more than one study.[4] The seven categories used in the SJI survey (right-hand column) derive from both a compilation of soft skills research and categories developed by the SJI-led Performance Skills Coalition.

4. *Are They Really Ready to Work?: Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century US Workforce*, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Society for Human Resource Management, 2006, pgs 1, 8, 16, 48, 49.

Crawford, Pat et al, *Comparative Analysis of Soft Skills: What is Important for New Graduates?,* Washington DC: Association of Public and Land–grant Universities, August 2011, pgs 2, 9-12.
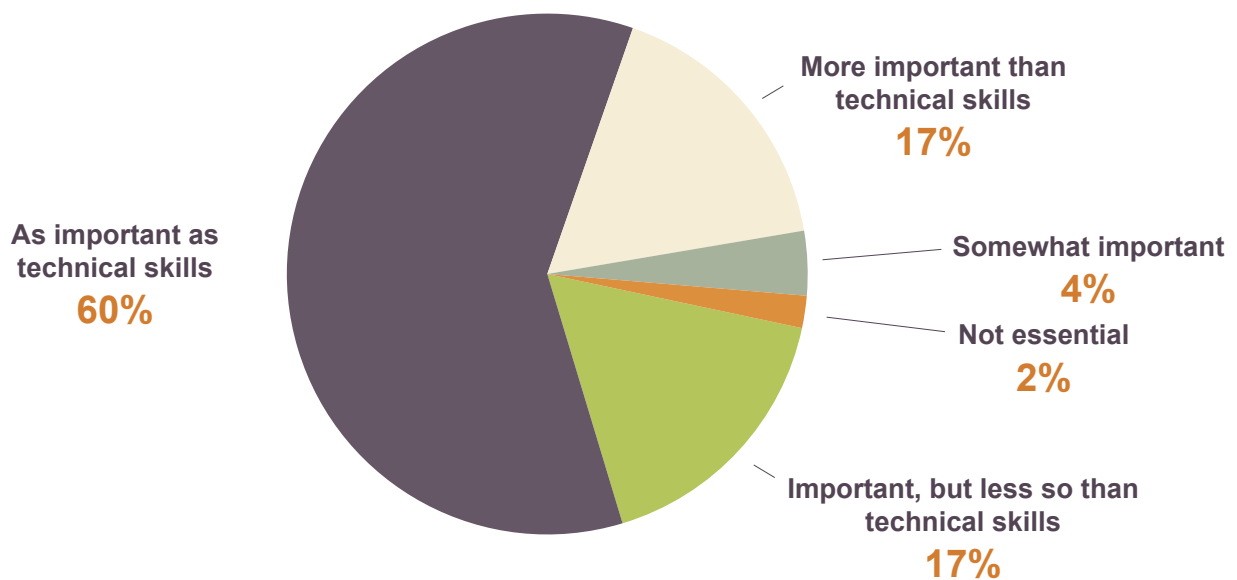
Brungardt, Christie, Ph.D., *The Intersection Between Soft Skill Development and Leadership Education*, Journal of Leadership Education, Volume 10, Issue 1, Winter 2011, pgs 4, 14-16.

SOFT SKILLS ARE <u>AT LEAST</u> AS CRITICAL AS TECHNICAL SKILLS TO ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT

Local businesses surveyed by SJI overwhelmingly stressed that soft skills matter a great deal, not only in obtaining a job but also in the success of a business. More than 75% of businesses surveyed stated that soft skills were **as important as or more important than technical skills** in securing entry-level employment (**Figure 2**). A similar percentage of businesses (71%) stated that soft skills are equally or more important than technical skills in carrying out company goals.

FIGURE 2: Importance of Soft Skills[5]

How important are soft skills to securing entry-level employment at your company?

As important as technical skills
60%

More important than technical skills
17%

Somewhat important
4%

Not essential
2%

Important, but less so than technical skills
17%

Findings from a national study of more than 400 employers found that soft skills were often more important to employers than basic knowledge skills.

Research on soft skills supports evidence from SJI's employer survey. Economist James Heckman's research is based on several studies from early childhood education programs serving low-income families and children of color. The longitudinal studies followed the students into adulthood to track "adult success" variables. Heckman argues that soft skills are a better predictor of adult success (in terms of salaries, graduation rates, home ownership) than technical skills. Moreover, soft skills such as perseverance, attention, self-confidence and motivation help students achieve higher scores on cognitive tests.[6]

Sociologist James Rosenbaum supports Heckman's research, demonstrating that certain non-cognitive skills (sociability, leadership, attendance, discipline) are linked to higher earnings by the time students are 28 years old. Rosenbaum's national research followed more than 7,000 students for 10 years, starting in high school. Results show that soft skills are connected to earnings both directly and indirectly. Soft skills have a slight direct impact on higher earnings, but a larger impact on grades in high school, which in turn are strong predictors of career attainment (a rise in one letter grade increases earnings by 12.8%).[7]

5. From *Are They Really Ready to Work?: Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century US Workforce*, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Society for Human Resource Management, 2006, pgs 1, 8, 16, 48, 49.

6. Heckman, James, *Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children*, Science, Vol 312, June 30, 2006, pgs 1901-1902.

7. Rosenbaum, James E., *Beyond College for All: Career Paths for the Forgotten Half*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2001, pgs 68-81, 170-189, 200-209.

FOR EMPLOYERS, NOT ALL SOFT SKILLS ARE EQUAL

As shown in **Figure 3**, local employers rated specific soft skills in terms of how important each skill is to entry-level positions. The answers follow a 5-point ranking:

- 1 - "not necessary for entry level positions"
- 2 - "somewhat beneficial"
- 3 - "beneficial"
- 4 - "very beneficial but not mandatory"
- 5 - "mandatory"

The SJI survey results show that local employers rank professionalism/integrity, reliability, communication, and teamwork as the top soft skills priorities for entry-level employment. Staying within ethical boundaries was the highest specific skill, followed by trustworthiness and dependability. At the other end of the spectrum, creativity/innovation and self-direction were viewed as the least critical of soft skills (**Figure 3**).

During follow-up interviews, employers remarked on the top priority soft skills from the survey. Communication, customer service, and email writing skills were emphasized most frequently by the employers interviewed. For example, an international trade/logistics employer stressed that employees need to develop an understanding of the customer and his or her priorities through conversation and emails. In another example, a manufacturer pointed to the importance of employees providing feedback when listening to ensure that they understand concepts and next steps (**Figure 4**).

On the topic of professionalism, an insurance employer expressed the importance of upholding ethical guidelines around customer confidentiality. Regarding teamwork, a manufacturing employer expressed the importance of employees being able to work closely with colleagues on projects to accomplish company goals. Regarding reliability, a healthcare employer spoke of the importance of meeting deadlines (**Figure 4**).

Survey results show that local employers rank the following soft skills as top priorities:

- **Professionalism / Integrity**
- **Reliability**
- **Communication**
- **Teamwork**

FIGURE 3. Soft Skills Priorities from Employer Surveys

MAIN CATEGORIES	SPECIFIC SKILLS	EMPLOYER AVERAGES
FIRST TIER PRIORITIES (4.50 – 5.00 AVERAGES)		
Professionalism / Integrity	Stays within ethical boundaries	4.82
	Trustworthy	4.80
	Accountable for actions	4.62
	Effective relationships with customers	4.52
Reliability	Dependable – follows through, turns in work on time	4.80
	Attendance – regular and on time	4.78
	Communicates regarding expectations, deadlines, setbacks	4.51
Communication	Effective oral communication	4.65
	Listens actively	4.56
Teamwork / Interpersonal	Respects the cultural values of others	4.63
	Gets along with others	4.52
SECOND TIER PRIORITES (4.00 – 4.49 AVERAGES)		
Communication	Effective written communication	4.29
Teamwork / Interpersonal	Displays appropriate manners in a variety of settings	4.40
	Performs well on a team	4.28
	Positively resolves conflict in timely manner	4.24
	Acknowledges others in a positive and appropriate manner	4.24
Problem Solving / Adaptable	Accepts change without problem	4.10
	Manages stress well	4.00
	Takes effective and appropriate action	4.00
THIRD TIER PRIORITIES (3.50 – 3.99 AVERAGES)		
Creativity / Innovation	Asks good questions	3.94
	Not afraid to try new things	3.58
Problem Solving / Adaptable	Willing to entertain different approaches	3.90
	Identifies and analyzes problems	3.54
Self-Direction	Takes initiative	3.82
	Sets realistic goals	3.58
	Anticipates next steps appropriately	3.51
LOWER PRIORITIES (BELOW 3.50 AVERAGES)		
Creativity / Innovation	Imaginative, curious	3.48
	Strives to improve the status quo	3.42
	Is able to see and communicate a vision	2.98
Self-Direction	Evaluates processes and situations	3.27

FIGURE 4. Highest Priority Soft Skills for Entry-Level Positions: Comments from Employer Interviews

SOFT SKILL	COMMENT	SECTORS
Communication	• External and internal communication • Verbal / oral • Emails are important • Customer service – show patience	Office Occupations (2)
	• Knowing what is important to your customer and communicating that • Communicating in proactive manner. Keeping customer informed ahead of time • Write clearly in emails	International Trade/Logistics
	• Provide feedback so that others know they are listening	Manufacturing
	• Still need personal touch even though everything is electronic. Emails need to be personal and not so abrupt. • Need to communicate effectively both verbally and non-verbally in meetings • Need to remain positive with customers and solution oriented	Healthcare
Professionalism	• Highly regulated industry – Need people with strong ethics to guide daily decisions • Have access to proprietary information that needs to remain confidential	Office Occupations
Teamwork	• We need people that can work closely in a team environment in order to be successful.	Manufacturing
Self-Direction	• Need to be able to multi-task to provide a "one-stop" shop for the patient. So you might be updating a database one moment and helping a customer the next.	Healthcare
Reliability	• Need to meet deadlines	Healthcare

EMPLOYERS REPORT MANY KEY SOFT SKILLS LACKING IN JOB APPLICANTS

The next step in determining training priorities for workforce development institutions was to ask employers about the soft skills that they find are the most lacking in entry-level job applicants. In follow up interviews, two employers spoke about "gateway skills" or "entry skills" in reference to the application process, meaning those skills that job applicants need to possess and demonstrate during the interviewing process (**Figure 5**).

Data from the survey illustrate that the soft skills categories that are both top priorities for local employers and most lacking in entry-level job applicants are communication, problem solving/adaptability, and reliability (**Figure 6**). "Communication" was undeniably the most common response, with 55% of employers stating that this skill was lacking in job applicants. Employers explained that job applicants need to speak with confidence, show ability to actively listen, and provide concise answers (**Figure 5**).

SOFT SKILL	COMMENT	SECTORS
Communication	• Oral communication • Ability to listen (not talk so much)	Manufacturing
	• Appropriate use of grammar (no slang) • Use of professional dialogue • Customer service skills • Listening skills • Talking in linear fashion (getting to the point) • Talking without use of fillers, such as "ah", between sentences	Office Occupations (2)
	• Ability to type without errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure • Ability to provide concise responses • Ability to speak with confidence	International Trade/Logistics
	• Non-verbal communication – eye contact, smiling, good body language • Politeness	Healthcare
Self-Direction	• Ability to articulate what types of training you need	Manufacturing
	• Good judgment and commonsense • Keeping the big picture in mind when making decisions (cannot be too rigid or too lose with the rules)	Healthcare
Problem Solving	• Ability to fix problems rather than "band-aiding" them	Manufacturing
	• Ability to be proactive and find alternatives to problems	International Trade/Logistics
Professionalism	• Showing up and looking the part, dressed for success • Being prepared	Office Occupations
	• Complying with dress code • Ability to write professional emails	International Trade/Logisitics
	• Complying with dress code	Healthcare

FIGURE 5. Skills Most Lacking in Entry-Level Job Applicants: Comments from Employer Interviews
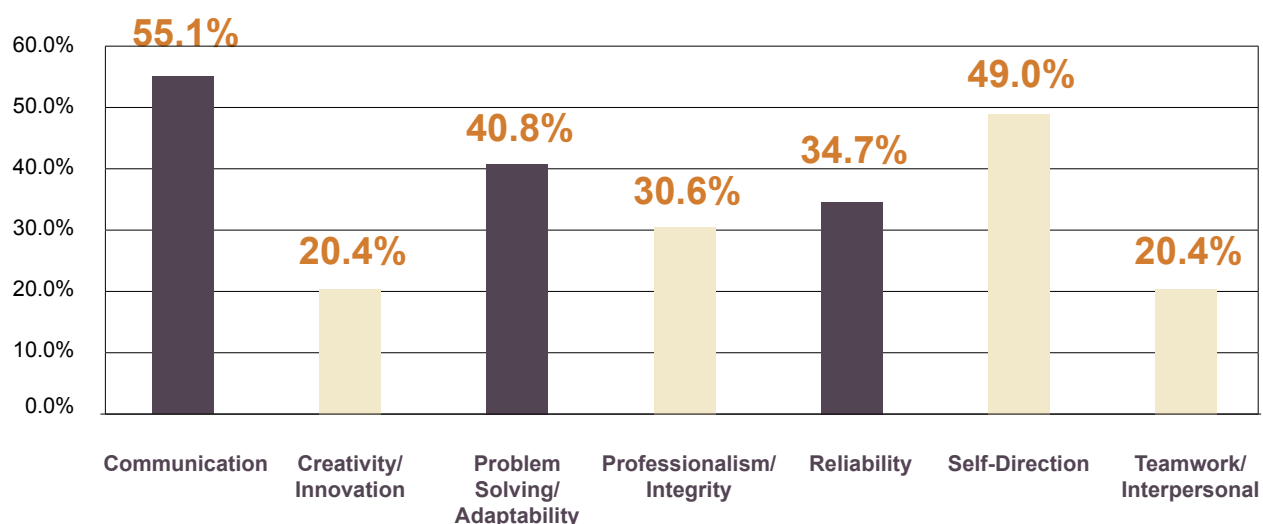
Even though self-direction was ranked high as lacking in job applicants, it was ranked as a third-tier priority on the list of desired soft skills for entry-level positions. Because of its low-priority ranking, it was not included as a top area to be addressed (**Figure 6**). It appears that job applicants possess requisite teamwork/interpersonal skills given that a low percentage of employers identified the skill set as lacking in job applicants even though it was ranked as a top-tier priority for entry-level positions (first tier in **Figure 3**).

Two employers provided more detail about problem-solving skills, expressing that job applicants need to demonstrate an ability to be proactive in solving problems, to find alternative solutions, and to provide more than band-aid fixes to problems (**Figure 5**).

Reliability was mentioned briefly in the interviews by one employer, only to say that it was lacking in job applicants but that the category was pretty self-explanatory. It appears that the most basic of work readiness skills – showing up and completing work – is revealed in the job application process as an area of concern for employers. This could be due in part to the applicants' lack of punctuality attending the interview and/or a negative reference from a former supervisor or colleague.

FIGURE 6: Soft Skills Lacking in Job Applicants

Soft skills employers find the most lacking in job applicants for entry-level positions

55.1%	20.4%	40.8%	30.6%	34.7%	49.0%	20.4%
Communication	Creativity/ Innovation	Problem Solving/ Adaptability	Professionalism/ Integrity	Reliability	Self-Direction	Teamwork/ Interpersonal

■ Darker bars represent areas most lacking in job applicants and highest priorities for employers

☐ Lighter bars represent areas that are either not lacking as much in job applicants and/or are lower priorities for employers

The soft skills categories that are both top priorities for local employers and most lacking in entry-level job applicants are:

- **Communication**
- **Problem Solving / Adaptability**
- **Reliability**

55% of employers state communication skills are lacking in entry-level job applicants.

VALUE OF SOFT SKILLS VARIES BY INDUSTRY SECTOR

One of this project's research goals was to uncover sector differences, if any, among SJI-focused sectors (manufacturing, healthcare, office occupations, and international trade/logistics) relating to soft skills. Unfortunately, the availability of data from the SJI survey was limited due to small sample sizes among industry sectors. However, there are other sector-based studies available for three of the four sectors. These studies, coupled with data available from SJI's employer interviews, are analyzed for differences here.

MANUFACTURING: National research on more than one thousand executives conducted by Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute found that two of the three top employee skill deficiencies reported by manufacturers today are soft skills related. These include problem-solving ability (52% respondents reported), followed by lack of basic technical training, and basic employability skills (attendance, timeliness, work ethic).[8] Problem-solving skills were also mentioned as lacking in job applicants by a manufacturer interviewed for this report, who stated that applicants often only demonstrate the ability "to band-aid problems instead of thinking of good alternatives and solutions."

According to the survey and interview data, communication is a priority across all four sectors, as mentioned previously in this report. However, manufacturing was the only sector that did not stress the importance of clear and positive email communication in interviews. Oral communication and listening skills were emphasized more by the

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8. *Boiling Point: The Skills Gap in US Manufacturing*, Deloitte and Manufacturing Institute, September 2011, p 8.

Soft skills priorities across three important sectors in Seattle are listed below. SJI focuses on these as they have positive job growth, self-sustaining wages for entry-level employment, and career ladders.

MANUFACTURING

- **Problem-Solving Ability**
- **Reliability**
- **Verbal Communication**
- **Listening**
- **Teamwork**

HEALTHCARE

- **Communication with Clients**
- **Written Communication**
- **Customer Service Skills**
- **Positive Attitude**

OFFICE OCCUPATIONS

- **Organizational Skills**
- **Verbal Communication**
- **Written Communication**
- **Teamwork**
- **Professionalism / Integrity**

manufacturer interviewed. Additionally, when asked what was unique to the manufacturing industry regarding soft skills, the manufacturing employer interviewed stated that teamwork was probably the most important soft skill at her company.

HEALTHCARE: According to research conducted by the Assessment Technologies Institute there are concerns in the nursing industry regarding the lack of requisite communication skills to effectively build trust between caregiver and client and to correctly provide patient care instructions. The research also cites the importance of leadership and professionalism skills within nursing occupations.[9]

Similarly, the healthcare employer interviewed by SJI stated that customer service skills are the most important focus for entry-level employees (mostly as administrative staff) at her clinics. The employer reported that employees "need to remain positive with customers and solution orientated." The major distinctive factor in healthcare right now regarding soft skills, according to this employer, relates to the service received by patients when they enter the office: "There has to be ease of access, questions need to be answered for patients, and staff should be on a name basis. It's that personal touch that will set one clinic apart from another."

OFFICE OCCUPATIONS: In a 2007 survey conducted by OfficeTeam, HR.com, and the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), administrative managers cited the following skills as most in-demand for administrative staff: organizational skills (87%), verbal communication (81%), teamwork and collaboration (78%), problem-solving (60%), tact and diplomacy (59%), and business writing (48%).[10] These findings are reflected in SJI's interviews with two professional service employers who also stressed the importance of verbal communication and business writing (especially email writing) as important skills for entry-level employees. In addition, one employer mentioned the need for entry-level employees to use "common sense when approaching problems." Another employer mentioned the importance of professional ethics, due to the confidential nature of the information that is processed in their company.

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9. *Soft Skills Research: Aligning Nurse's Touch with Best Practices*, Assessment Technologies Institute, February 2012, p 4, http://www.atitesting.com/Libraries/pdf/Nurse_s_Touch_Professional_Communication_whitepaper.sflb.ashx.

10. Klaus, Peggy, *The Hard Truth about Soft Skills: Workplace Lessons Smart People Wish They'd Learned Sooner*, Collins, 2008, http://www.bettersoftskills.com/research.htm.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND EMPLOYERS VARY IN SOFT SKILLS DEEMED MOST CRITICAL AND MOST LACKING

The data in **Figures 7** and **8** show the responses of seven community college administrators, who were asked to rank soft skills as they relate to student success (completion of program). By comparing community college results with employer results, conclusions can be drawn regarding the level of consistency of priorities for student success and job applicant success.

Within the first and second tiers of soft skills priorities, community colleges ranked most elements of professionalism/integrity and reliability at comparably high rates to employers (**Figure 7**). The most notable difference is within the communication and teamwork/interpersonal categories, with community colleges ranking most of the specific skills in those categories as lower priorities.

Given that communication is reported as the most lacking skill in job applicants and students, it is expanded upon more here (**Figure 8**). As shown in **Figure 7**, community colleges awarded less priority

to speaking and listening skills, instead placing more of an emphasis than employers on written communication skills. These results indicate a possible disconnection between workplace and school goals. Community colleges, however, agreed with employers when they ranked communication as the most lacking skill amongst students.

Because most students develop written skills through homework, written tests, and papers, there is perhaps less of an emphasis on oral communication skills at community colleges. However, entry-level workers need oral communication skills for interacting with customers, internal problem-solving with colleagues and supervisors, as well as interactions during the job application process. This is not to say that area community colleges are not addressing soft skills development in this area. In fact, several community college strategies to develop their skills will be discussed in the best practice section (page 22).

Notable differences in soft skills priorities between community colleges and area employers:
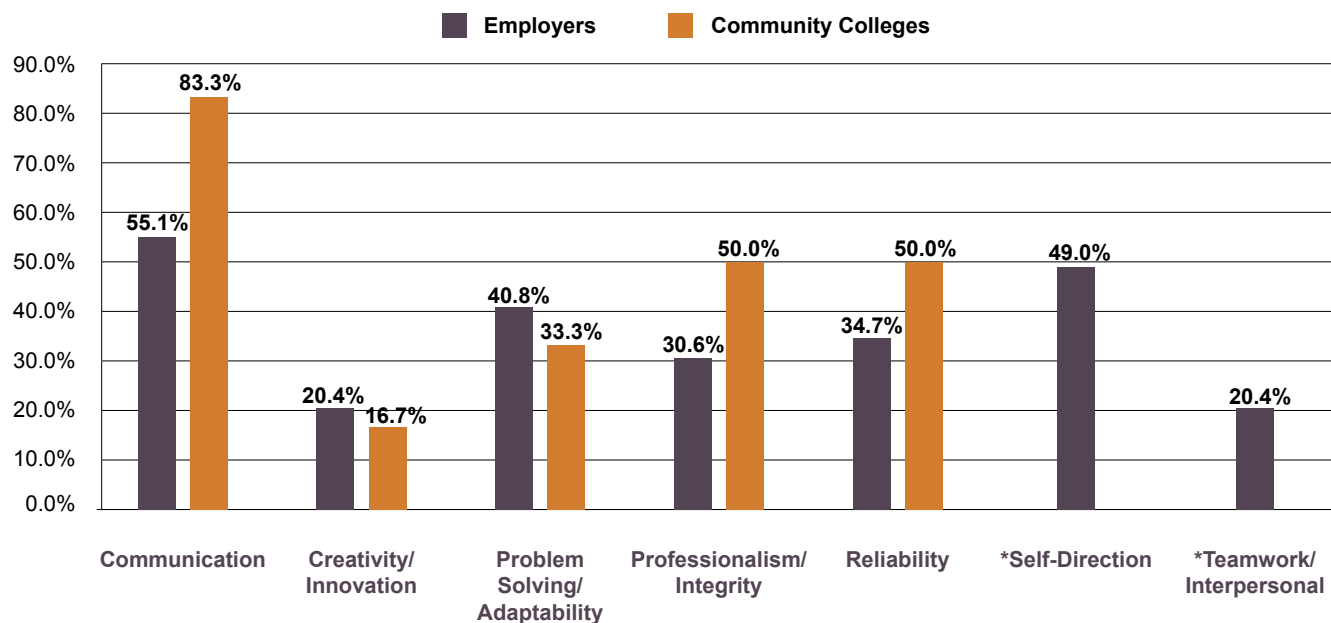
- **More emphasis on written skills, less on verbal skills in community colleges**

- **Less of an emphasis on teamwork / interpersonal skills in community colleges**

- **Community colleges see more deficits in reliability and professionalism in students than employers do in job applicants.**

- **Community colleges see fewer issues with problem solving skills than do employers.**

FIGURE 7. Community Colleges' Soft Skills Priorities from Surveys

MAIN CATEGORIES	SPECIFIC SKILLS	COMMUNITY COLLEGE AVERAGES	COMPARISON TO EMPLOYER AVERAGES
FIRST TIER PRIORITIES (4.50 – 5.00 AVERAGES)			
Professionalism / Integrity	Stays within ethical boundaries	5.00	4.82
	Accountable for actions	4.50	4.62
Reliability	Attendance – regular and on time	5.00	4.78
	Dependable – follows through, turns in work on time	4.83	4.80
	Communicates regarding expectations, deadlines, setbacks	4.50	4.51
Communication	Effective oral communication	4.50	4.65
SECOND TIER PRIORITES (4.00 – 4.49 AVERAGES)			
Communication	Listens actively	4.40	4.56
	Effective written communication	4.33	4.29
	Gets along with others	4.00	4.52
Self-Direction	Takes initiative	4.33	3.82
	Evaluates processes and situations	4.00	3.27
Professionalism / Integrity	Trustworthy	4.17	4.80
Problem Solving / Adaptable	Takes effective and appropriate action	4.17	4.00
	Manages stress well	4.17	4.00
	Accepts change without problem	4.00	4.10
THIRD TIER PRIORITIES (3.50 – 3.99 AVERAGES)			
Teamwork / Interpersonal	Respects the cultural values of others	3.83	4.63
	Performs well on a team	3.83	4.28
	Displays appropriate manners in a variety of settings	3.67	4.40
	Positively resolves conflict in timely manner	3.67	4.24
Creativity / Innovation	Asks good questions	3.83	3.94
	Not afraid to try new things	3.80	3.58
	Strives to improve the status quo	3.60	3.42
Problem Solving / Adaptable	Identifies and analyzes problems	3.67	3.54
Self-Direction	Sets realistic goals	3.67	3.58
	Anticipates next steps appropriately	3.50	3.51
LOWER PRIORITIES (BELOW 3.50 AVERAGES)			
Problem Solving / Adaptable	Willing to entertain different approaches	3.40	3.90
Creativity / Innovation	Is able to see and communicate a vision	3.40	2.98
	Imaginative, curious	3.20	3.48
Teamwork / Interpersonal	Acknowledges others in a positive and appropriate manner	3.20	4.24
Professionalism / Integrity	Effective relationships with customers	NA	4.52

FIGURE 8: Soft Skills Lacking in Students and Job Applicants

Which soft skills do you find the most lacking in job applicants for entry-level positions? In students?

Legend: ■ Employers ■ Community Colleges

Skill	Employers	Community Colleges
Communication	55.1%	83.3%
Creativity/Innovation	20.4%	16.7%
Problem Solving/Adaptability	40.8%	33.3%
Professionalism/Integrity	30.6%	50.0%
Reliability	34.7%	50.0%
*Self-Direction	49.0%	
*Teamwork/Interpersonal	20.4%	

* No data available from community colleges

# EMPLOYERS SEE ONLY LIMITED ROLE FOR THEMSELVES IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The top response from employers regarding the responsibility of soft skills development was "employees themselves." Beyond the individual taking responsibility, about two-thirds (67%) of area employers believe that the educational system has an important role in the development of soft skills (**Figure 9**). Heckman's (2006) research supports the latter response from employers. He argues that early childhood education organizations and K-12 schools are the most critical institutions to address soft skills in an effort to gain significant changes in employment-related outcomes later (salaries).[11]

About half of businesses surveyed by SJI (54%) agreed that employers have a role in helping workers to develop soft skills. However, most of those surveyed (80%) said that they handled soft skills deficiencies individually as problems arise as opposed to taking a proactive role in employees' soft

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11. Heckman, James, *Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children*, Science, Vol 312, June 30, 2006, pgs 1901-1902.

FIGURE 9: Employers' Views on Key Players that Help Workers Develop Soft Skills

In general, whose role do you think it is to help workers develop soft skills? (Choose all that apply.)
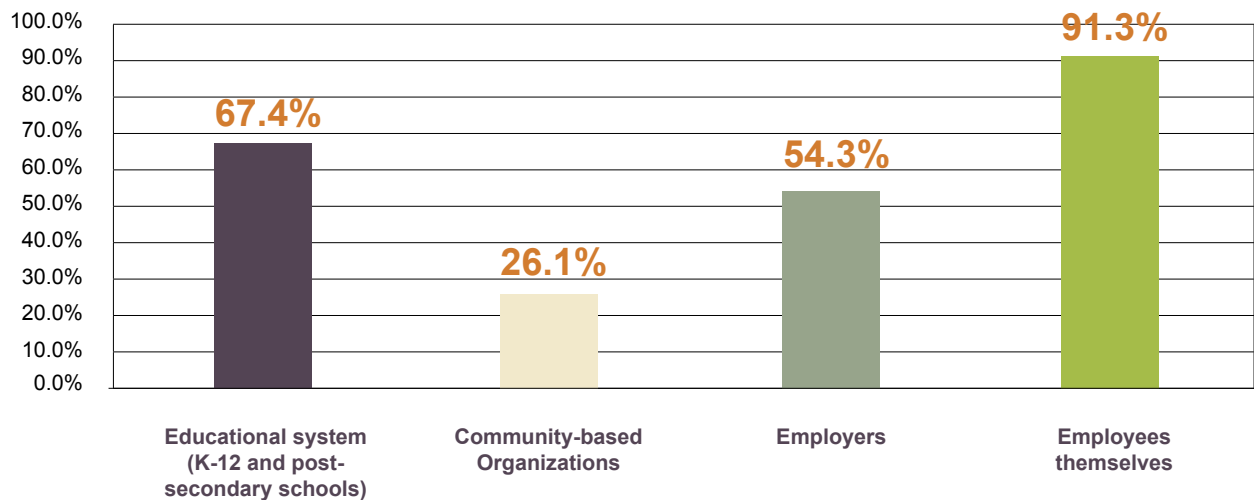
skills development. These findings suggest that most employers are willing to play a limited advisory role on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to a trainer role.

There are exceptions to this reactive approach among employers, with 17% of employers stating that they offered trainings to proactively address soft skills issues. Most of the employers interviewed fit into this group, with four of the five employers stating that they provide soft skills training for employees. See **Figure 10** below for types of trainings offered by these companies.

FIGURE 10. Soft Skills Trainings that Local Employers Offer

Comments from Employer Interviews on Training Areas	Sectors
Communication, Problem Solving, and Teamwork Trainings	Manufacturing
Conflict Resolution and Time Management Trainings	Office Occupations
Presenting Skills and Customer Service Trainings	International Trade / Logistics
Developing a Customer Service Training Program	Healthcare

BEST PRACTICES IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

While there is a larger body of research on early education and K-12 soft skills development, the focus for this report is to describe best practices existing in postsecondary education and workforce development. Evidence from this survey and from other research shows that adults in the current job market need improved soft skills. Organizations like Seattle Jobs Initiative desire to know the soft skills development best practices within adult training and education systems. Included here are examples from four-year colleges, community colleges in Washington, and workforce development organizations.

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES IN FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

Existing postsecondary education literature refers to "student engagement" – a student's activity level in the learning process – as a way to demonstrate that students with higher levels of activity in the learning process are more likely to graduate than those with lower levels.[12] Many of the indicators measuring student engagement parallel those measuring soft skills indicators prevalent in this report. Therefore, student engagement studies are used to suggest best practices for soft skills development in postsecondary education. The role of student engagement activities is to integrate soft skills development in the classroom and campus life through the practice and feedback of specific skills such as: communication, teamwork, reliability, and discipline.

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12. Chickering, A.W., and Gamson, Z.F, *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*, AAHE Bulletin, 39(7), 1987, 3–7.

Since 2000, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has measured student engagement levels by annually surveying students enrolled in four-year colleges. Education researchers applied longitudinal results of the NSSE to develop a best practice framework for student engagement. The results of their work consist of in-depth descriptions of twenty colleges that have strong student outcomes and a six-point framework (see sidebar) to guide other colleges in attaining better success rates.[13] While this study is specific to four-year colleges, there are many findings that would be transferable to community colleges.

The six case examples presented here were chosen from the NSSE study because of certain soft skills development strategies implemented in the schools and the transferability of programs and policies from four-year colleges to community colleges. In addition, several of the schools described here serve a similar target population to SJI such as: low-income students, students of color, immigrants, part-time students, and commuter students. They provide practical insight as to how parts of the framework above might be implemented.[14] The descriptions below provide program details while the side bar excerpts explain how programs directly relate to soft skills development.

Alverno College (Wisconsin) uses a peer learning assessment model. The emphasis is on mastery rather than grades. Students receive feedback on performance on a variety of projects. In order to graduate each student needs to be proficient in eight abilities: communication, analysis, problem solving, values-based decision making, social interaction,

Summaries of how colleges integrate soft skills in the classroom and beyond

1. **Alverno College** incorporates soft skills into its assessments. Encourages communication skills with peer learning assessments and interaction with professionals in the community.

2. **California State University** incorporates high levels of teamwork and presentation options for students. Group projects allow students to practice accountability skills in mutually reliant settings. Students practice soft skills through service learning experiences. Students learn about self-direction in designing their own learning plan.

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13. Kuh, G. D. et al, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*, Jossey-Bass, 2010, pgs 18-63.

14. Kuh, G. D. et al, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*, Jossey-Bass, 2010, pgs 18-63, 114-120.

global perspective, effective citizenship, and aesthetic engagement. Alverno partners with the community by using over 400 "external assessor" volunteers each year to assess students' educational development. These volunteer professionals provide feedback to students on progress.

California State University at Monterey Bay

uses outcomes based education (OBE) or systematic assessments of student learning. Students can choose to demonstrate their knowledge related to course outcomes in any number of ways, including: presentations, leading discussions, writing papers, taking exams, or group projects. Students are asked to think of research not in the abstract, but as practitioners. "What are you going to do about this problem?" Faculty asks students to develop strategies that will help them achieve outcomes, focusing on their strengths as a student. Faculty members use Blackboard technology to provide feedback on multiple drafts for students that do not live close to campus. All students must complete two service learning experiences. During the Freshman Year Experience Seminar students design an Individualized Learning Plan to achieve the seminar's five learning outcomes.

Evergreen State College (Washington) uses a Coordinated Study Program. The Program takes up the entire 16 credits of a quarter. The work is organized around a theme or problem and examined from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The college does not award letter grades. Feedback at Evergreen is the most extensive of any school researched. Students and faculty spend considerable time reviewing student performance. Several evaluation processes are used throughout the course of the student's school career. Evergreen has a clear road map to success with six expectations of every graduate. These expectations are posted in highly visible places on campus.

3. **Evergreen State College** uses regular feedback meetings with faculty for student evaluations in place of letter grades. Meetings help students increase communication, listening, and adaptability skills. Clear expectation road maps make self-direction skill learning easier for students.

4. **George Mason University** emphasizes collaborative learning using technology that builds communication and teamwork skills.

5. **University of Texas at El Paso** helps students develop teamwork, self-direction, and problem-solving skills in their Seminar in Critical Inquiry program. Meetings with teaching teams enhance students' communication and adaptability skills.

6. **Winston Salem State University** uses adjustment courses to develop student's reliability and self-direction skills. Mentoring helps students with communication skills. The school's mission helps direct faculty to design curriculum that builds leadership skills.

Even though **George Mason University (Virginia)** is mostly a commuter college, it has developed structures and opportunities to bring community members together to connect with one another. Their Technology Across the Curriculum (TAC) policy includes ten instructional technology goals. More than 100 courses were redesigned to emphasize collaborative learning using technology.

At the **University of Texas at El Paso** all new students take UNIV 1301: Seminar in Critical Inquiry. The seminar is designed to acquaint students with the campus. The seminar is taught by a teaching team consisting of a librarian, faculty member, and peer leader. It emphasizes active learning such as group projects and open forums. The teaching team meets with students one-on-one to monitor their academic progress.

At **Winston Salem State University (North Carolina)** all new students must enroll in one of three new-student adjustment courses. Faculty members teaching these sections also serve as students' academic advisors and mentors for the first academic year. The mission of the school "enter to learn, leave to serve" is embedded in the culture of the school and used by faculty as guidance in academic programming.

HOW SEATTLE AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGES INCORPORATE BEST PRACTICES

From SJI's survey of area community colleges, six responded to a question about how they incorporate soft skills training into the curriculum. The most utilized strategy is "classroom policies that incorporate the use of soft skills in class" with five colleges responding (**Figure 11**). From the examples in the sidebar it appears that area community colleges are using the following best practice strategies to train students in soft skills:

- team projects,
- leadership & mentoring programs,
- college preparation courses,
- work study.

FIGURE 11: How Seattle-Area Community Colleges Incorporate Soft Skills

Incorporating soft skills training into curriculum and academic activities by number of responses from survey

Category	Responses
Do not incorporate soft skill training...	0
Extracurricular activities	1
Mentoring programs	3
Tutoring program focused on building...	1
Classroom policies that incorporate...	5
Student engagement activities	4
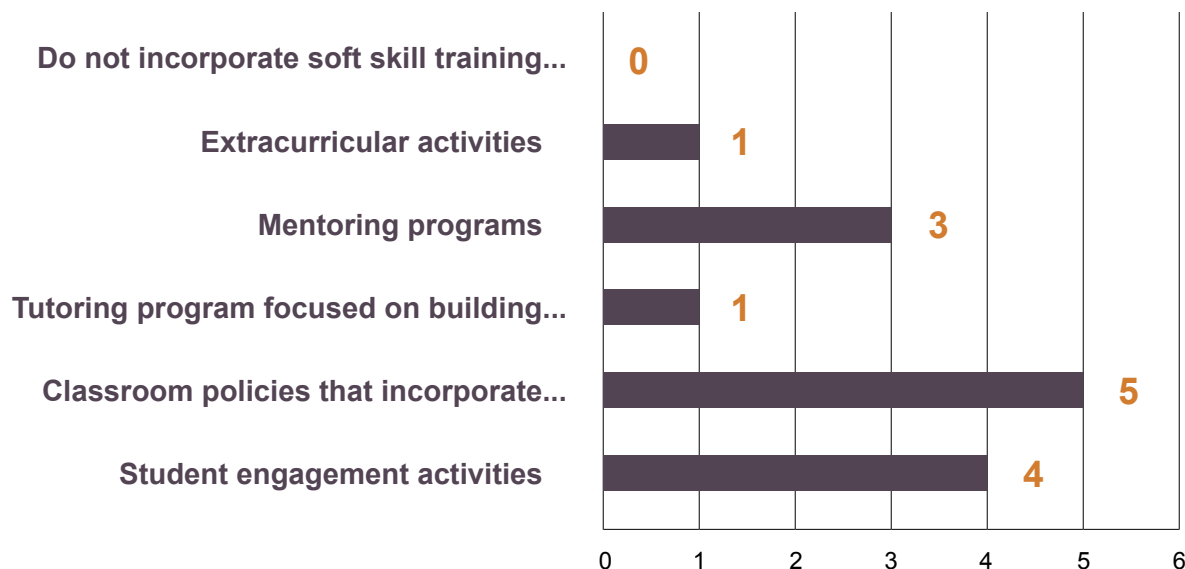
Specific Responses from Three Seattle-Area Community College Administrators on Soft Skills Integration

"We use student leadership, peer mentor programs. Soft skills are demonstrated and required in many classes which include team projects, communication, accountability etc."

"We offer interpersonal communication, which specifically asks students to understand and engage in activities. We also offer specific HDC (human development) classes on college preparation."

"Faculty use teamwork assignments across all disciplines. Student leadership offers multiple opportunities for soft skills training. Volunteerism in tutoring/mentoring is encouraged. Work study is available in many areas that duplicate job requirements upon graduation."

How the TSDF Model Works

TELL – is the explanation component of skill training. Faculty explain each step: the who, what, when, where, and how.

SHOW – is the instructor demonstration of the skill. Repetition may be necessary during this component of the model. Doing the skill in "real" time during the show is critical. It is important to note, however, that a demonstration may be done slowly or broken into steps initially before doing "real" time.

DO – is the opportunity for every participant to practice the skill. During this component it is critical to let individuals try the entire skill before providing corrective instruction. The DO is the component often left out of skill training, yet it is the most important.

FEEDBACK – is the opportunity for the trainer to share with participants what they did well.

– From Center of Excellence for Career's in Education

TELL SHOW DO FEEDBACK MODEL

In addition to what the Seattle-Area community colleges that responded to this survey are doing regarding soft skills development, the Washington State Board of Community & Technical Colleges has also determined that more needs to be done to help faculty in this area. At the request of the Board, the Center for Excellence in Careers and Education recently implemented soft skills trainings for professional technical faculty at Washington community colleges. These institutions teach faculty how to incorporate soft skills into the classroom using a "Tell Show Do Feedback" model. The training engages faculty on the importance of soft skills and assists them to incorporate soft skills into their lesson plans (described in sidebar). Thus far, two training sessions have been held in Pierce and King Counties.[15]

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15. Conversation with Erik Tinglestad from Center of Excellence for Careers in Education.

BEST PRACTICES IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

While SJI incorporates soft skills into its training curricula, this research looks at what other workforce development organizations are doing to help participants develop these skills. Workforce organizations often create a work environment and work-like tasks to allow their clients to practice soft skills. As one veteran workforce development practitioner put it, "You can't lecture on soft skills, they need to be practiced."[16] These basic tenants are expressed in Houghton and Procsio's 2001 Public Private Venture's study of four workforce development training organizations. These organizations serve a similar population as SJI: low-income individuals with multiple employment barriers. Best practices for developing soft skills that are shared by these organizations are described below.[17]

Integrate soft skills training into every element of the curriculum: Soft skills should be woven through an entire training program and not relegated to a separate one-week seminar or a special hour of the day. Students need to have repetitive practice to master certain skills like responsibility and time management. For example, at Op-Net the goal of satisfying the customer is always at the forefront while students learn technical skills. Discussion is incorporated to the curriculum as a regular part of any lesson plan. Students need to practice how to use "clear, correct, courteous communication," according to a manager with Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow.[18]

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16. Interview with Margaret Haywood, Director of Workforce Development, Inspiration Corporation.

17. Houghton, Ted and Tony Proscio, *Hard Work on Soft Skills: Creating a "Culture of Work" in Workforce Development*, Public and Private Ventures, October 2001, pgs 11, 14-18, 21-23, 50-55.

18. Houghton, Ted and Tony Proscio, *Hard Work on Soft Skills: Creating a "Culture of Work" in Workforce Development*, Public and Private Ventures, October 2001, pg 20.

Hard Work on Soft Skills: Creating a Culture of Work in Workforce Development

ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED:

- **Fast Track to Work, Cabrillo Community College in Watsonsville CA**

- **Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow in Brooklyn NY**

- **Training Inc in Boston, Indianapolis, and Newark**

- **Op-Net in San Francisco CA (no longer running)**

Create work or work-like tasks and establish teams to complete them: Students are given tasks to accomplish as a team. As the tasks rotate, one team will advise another on their experience and how the next team might make improvements in efficiency. The assignments are less about the task and more about teamwork, research, and public performance. Similar to the team projects mentioned in the student engagement model, the students in these teams are learning mutual reliance, accountability, and adaptability.

Put trainees in employer's role from time to time so that by managing they can learn to be managed: Playing a managerial role gives students an understanding of the pressures of supervisors, which is important for students who are moving into entry-level employment. Fast Track to Work does this by incorporating collaborative discussions around classroom rules and grading criteria. Training Inc and Opt-Net design a system of hierarchy that is used in work simulations.

Establish the discipline of the workplace in all aspects of the program: All of the programs studied in the Public/Private Venture report used strict punctuality, dress code, and attendance rules.

Re-create the physical environment of work to the fullest extent possible: In addition to traditional classroom settings, the training programs researched replicated their sector specific settings and created office spaces or warehouse spaces in an effort to acclimate students to those environments.

Give participants ample opportunity to meet successful people: Most of the programs did not have mentoring programs due to the difficulty in finding long-term commitments from professionals. However, programs invited professionals and some former students to speak to students during the training. These speakers provided helpful insights to the work world and job application process, as well as words of encouragement.

Support services and soft skills go hand in hand: In order for students to be fully invested in a training program, they need to have their basic needs addressed. Problems with access to child care, stable housing, transportation, or healthcare can prevent potential students from participating in courses. Many of the programs either offered or partnered with other organizations to offer these support services.

SOFT SKILLS ASSESSMENTS

Assessments of soft skills are used for a variety of purposes. This report focuses on three of these: the measurement of how well community colleges implement specific soft skills interventions, the measurement of soft skills competencies in students' pre- and post-training, and the measurement of job applicants' soft skills. Specific assessment tools – **CCSSE** and **AccuVision**, and **WorkKeys** used in community colleges – are discussed. Finally, findings from employers surveyed by SJI regarding how they assess job applicants are presented.

ASSESSMENTS USED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The **Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)** is run by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at the University of Texas at Austin. It measures several indicators of student engagement based on student perception following the standards set by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). These are the same indicators used for the best practice research from *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter* as described on page 20. Among the colleges participating in CCSSEE and providing data for this report were eight Seattle-area colleges.[19]

Figure 12 displays scores on specific CCSSEE engagement activities at these eight local colleges compared with national averages. This list only incorporates a sampling of all the measurements in the five core areas mentioned in the sidebar. For

The CCSSE survey measures student perceptions of how well community colleges are doing in the following five core areas:

1. Student Collaboration

2. Staff / Student Interaction

3. Academic Challenge

4. Student Support

5. Student Fffort

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19. *Community College Survey of Student Engagement*, The College of Education, University of Texas at Austin, http://www.ccsse.org/survey/survey.cfm.

these specific indicators the community colleges that had the most consistency in meeting or exceeding national averages were Highline Community College, Shoreline Community College, Green River Community College, South Seattle Community College, and Renton Technical College. Engagement strategies that were strong for most local community colleges (in comparison to national averages) across the board were: use of team projects outside of class, use of community based projects, and email correspondence with instructors. Weaker areas at local colleges include: providing students the support they need to succeed, students discussing grades or assignments with instructors, and students being academically challenged.

This is just an example of how the CCSSE rubric works. The data can be used by community colleges as they work to improve student engagement strategies. Colleges with expertise in certain areas might be able to advise other colleges on how to improve in the five core student engagement areas. It appears that some area colleges are using CCSSE results already to improve strategies, with two college administrators surveyed by SJI stating that they use CCSSE results to assess how well they are doing to engage students. Three administrators surveyed, conversely, stated that they did not measure soft skills outcomes.

South Seattle Community College uses **AccuVision**, a software program designed and managed by Learning Resources Inc (LRI), in its workforce education program to monitor students' soft skills competencies pre- and post-training. The software uses videos to present students with real work scenarios and follows each video with a set of questions. The correctness of a student's answer is based on a rubric set by employer groups in the development of the software.
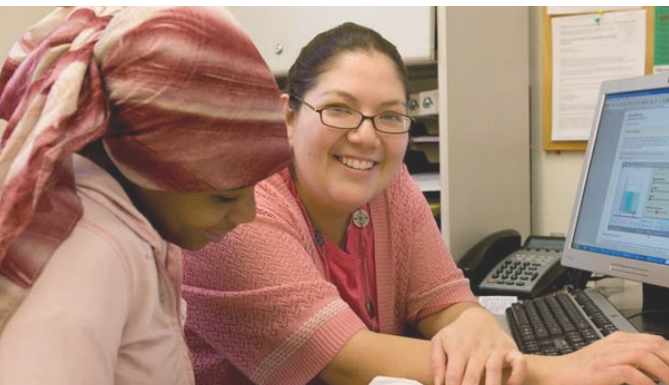
FIGURE 12. Community College Survey on Student Engagement: Scores from Seattle-Area Schools

CCSSE MEASUREMENT	COMMUNITY COLLEGE SCORES								National Average
	South Seattle (2011)	Central Seattle (2011)	North Seattle (2011)	Highline (2010)	Renton Tech (2012)	Bellevue (2011)	Green River (2011)	Shoreline (2011)	
Providing the support you need to succeed at this college	2.93	2.98	2.9	3	2.85	2.85	2.94	**3.05**	3
Helping you cope with nonacademic responsibilities	1.97	2.05	1.82	2	**2.08**	1.85	1.92	1.99	1.97
Providing the support that you need to thrive socially	2.13	2.2	1.94	2.2	**2.25**	2.05	2.23	2.13	2.19
Worked with students outside of class to prepare class assignments	2.09	2.14	1.96	2.1	2.07	2.14	**2.35**	2.17	1.92
Made a class presentation	2.04	**2.23**	1.88	2.2	**2.23**	2.03	2.17	2.07	2.11
Participated in a community-based project as part of a class assignment	1.39	**1.46**	1.25	1.4	1.39	1.38	1.37	1.49	1.33
Prepared two or more drafts on a project before turning assignment in	**2.7**	2.49	2.38	**2.7**	2.35	2.48	2.56	2.52	2.52
Use email to communicate with instructor	2.86	2.84	2.79	2.9	2.81	2.93	2.88	**2.99**	2.81
Discussed grades or assignments with instructor	2.52	2.53	2.38	2.5	**2.69**	2.48	2.57	2.58	2.59
Discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class	1.9	1.88	1.75	1.8	1.75	1.72	1.87	**1.96**	1.77
Received prompt feedback from instructors on performace	2.71	2.73	2.67	2.7	2.63	2.62	2.66	**2.87**	2.7
Talked about career plans with instructor or advisor	**2.17**	2.04	1.91	2.1	2.11	1.96	**2.17**	2.11	2.08
Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations	2.64	2.57	2.51	2.6	2.64	2.55	2.56	**2.68**	2.61

- Rankings (1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often)
- Bold Numbers = Highest school averages for that category
- White Boxes (no shading) = At or above national average
- Shaded Boxes = Below national average

AccuVision software uses videos to measure student responses to real work scenarios, whereas WorkKeys software uses multiple-choice questions. Both software programs measure general workforce readiness skills. Below are the specific soft skills measured in each program.

AccuVision	WorkKeys
• Integrity	• Applied Technology
• Responsibility	• Business Writing
• Self-Esteem	• Listening for Understanding
• Self-Management	• Teamwork
• Sociability	• Workplace Observation
• Customer Relations	• Fit
• Decision-Making	• Performance
• Commitment to Quality	• Talent

From LRI's and ACT's websites: http://www.learning-resources.com/
WorkReadinessSkills.cfm, http://www.act.org/products/workforce-act-workkeys/
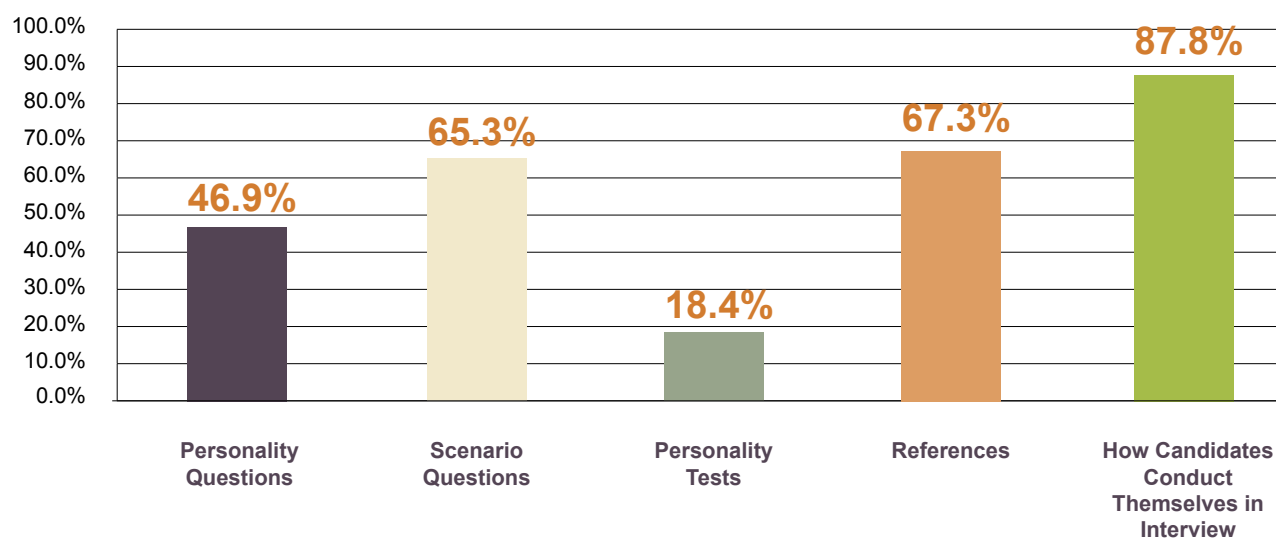
The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WDC) also piloted AccuVision, but did not have the funds to continue the project. Beth Blanchard of WDC stated that "the program is a strong tool." Yet, Blanchard also commented that some of scenarios used are "somewhat dated" and that LRI is in the process of updating the software.

All Air Washington community colleges have funding for students in this aerospace workforce training program to use a similar assessment called **WorkKeys**, run by ACT. Of these eleven Washington schools, three are in the Seattle area: South Seattle Community College, North Seattle Community College, and Renton Technical College. While North Seattle Community College is in the program, it has not started using WorkKeys yet. One drawback to both of AccuVision and WorkKeys is that they are "expensive to administer," as commented by Wendy Price from South Seattle Community College. One benefit of the programs is that they include a Work Readiness Credential when students pass the tests.

FIGURE 13: Assessments of Soft Skills in Application Process

How does your company assess soft skills for prospective hires?

Personality Questions: 46.9%
Scenario Questions: 65.3%
Personality Tests: 18.4%
References: 67.3%
How Candidates Conduct Themselves in Interview: 87.8%

ASSESSMENTS USED IN JOB APPLICATION PROCESS

Most employers surveyed, 88%, assessed the soft skills of job applicants by how they conduct themselves in interviews (**Figure 13**). The next most widely used assessment was references (67%), followed by scenario questions (65%). As mentioned previously, employers look for professional dress and language during interviews. They also want applicants to demonstrate strong problem-solving skills.

In *Beyond College for All*, Rosenbaum agrees that references often provide an accurate assessment of strengths and weaknesses in soft skills. On the other hand, he disagrees with employers placing such a large emphasis on how candidates conduct themselves in interviews. He recommends that employers should also look at high school transcripts, especially for applicants that do not have college credits, for a more accurate portrayal of soft skills abilities. His research finds that high school grades have strong positive correlations with soft skills such as: sociability, leadership, attendance, and discipline.[20]

20. Rosenbaum, James E., *Beyond College for All: Career Paths for the Forgotten Half*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2001, pgs 170-189.

SUMMARY OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT BEST PRACTICES AND ASSESSMENTS

This best practice summary is a compilation of information from four year colleges, community colleges, and workforce development organizations discussed in previous sections of this report.

1. **Set clear expectations**: As with technical skills, students need a clear understanding of what is expected of them regarding soft skills and how those skills are transferable to the workplace.

2. **Incorporate soft skills into grading system and assessment processes**: Schools and training organizations need to recognize the importance of soft skills by building a grading and assessment process that measures both cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Some four-year schools like Alverno and Evergreen College are national leaders in this movement towards non-cognitive assessments. In another example, the workforce education departments at some community colleges use online assessments, AccuVision and WorkKeys, to test students on their skills pre- and post-training.

3. **Practice continuously and provide feedback**: Successful workforce development organizations have shown that soft skills cannot be simply lectured or taught in a stand-alone workshop. Instead, continuous practice should be incorporated throughout workforce training curricula with feedback from peers and faculty. Similarly, successful colleges have found that using collaborative learning approaches that incorporate soft skills help students engage and be more successful in school.

4. **Incorporate real-world situations and environments**: Students need to gain practical experience about what typical work days are like in a particular field. Training organizations often simulate work spaces, by both physical structures and projects. Postsecondary schools also use this strategy through real case scenario projects, community projects, and work study programs. Soft skills play a big role in these strategies because most of these simulated projects are team-based, where students get the opportunity to practice interpersonal, reliability, and problem-solving skills.

5. **Encourage professional communication between students and their peers, faculty, and community**: In the job application process and in the workplace, employees' communication with their colleagues and supervisors is constant. Employees can expect to problem solve, listen, adapt, receive and give feedback on a daily basis. Thus, it is critical for students to practice these skills while still in school.

6. **Maintain a learning organization culture**: Postsecondary schools and training organizations also need evaluation systems to ensure that the strategies being employed are working. Assessments, like CCSSE that measure soft skills activities, help community colleges evaluate their strategies by gaining perspectives from students. Learning organizations also employ strategies to help staff continually improve. For example, Washington community colleges are helping faculty learn this technique through the "Tell Show Do Feedback" model.

# SOFT SKILLS CREDENTIALS MAY HAVE LIMITED VALUE IN LOCAL LABOR MARKET

As mentioned in the assessment section, there are currently a few Seattle-area community colleges that have (or will soon have) the capability to offer students a soft skills-based Work Readiness Credential through the AccuVision and WorkKeys software programs. However, the Work Readiness Credential is not well known within the business community, with 86% of employers surveyed by SJI stating that they are not aware of it.

Local workforce development organizations have begun conversations with employers about endorsing a soft skills/work readiness certificate that employers would help develop, with the idea that a certificate would hold more weight if employers have a better understanding and awareness of it. Beth Blanchard of the Workforce Development Council (WDC) said "employers thought [the certificate] was a good idea, but we have not gone through the process yet." Employers surveyed by SJI tended to agree with this sentiment, with 74% responding that the

What is your opinion of a soft skills credential on a job applicant's resume?
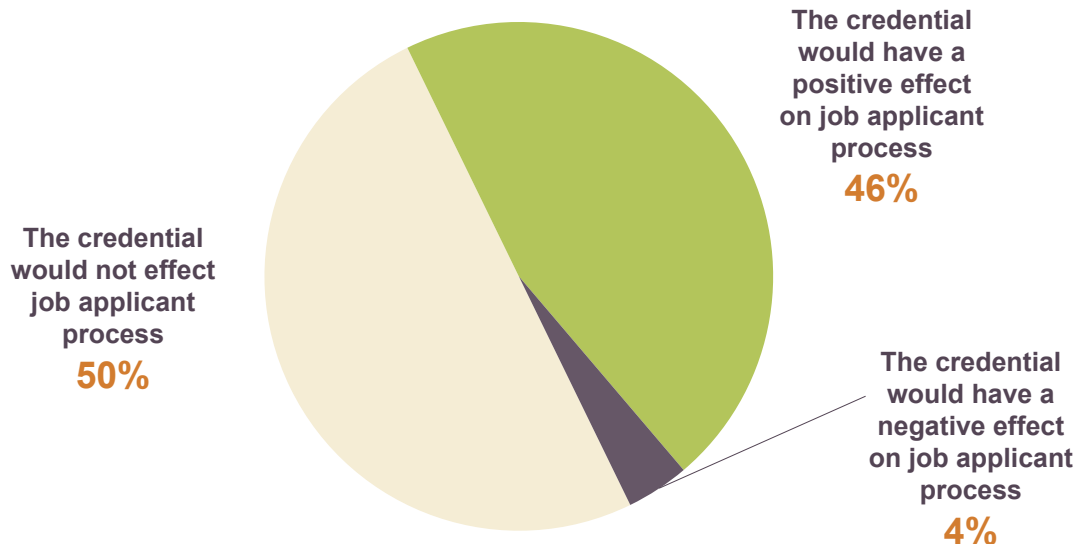
The credential would have a positive effect on job applicant process
46%

The credential would not effect job applicant process
50%

The credential would have a negative effect on job applicant process
4%

development of a soft skills credential is an important task for community colleges and workforce development providers.

Conversely, when employers were asked about what impact such a credential would have on the job application process, significantly less, only 46%, stated that it would have a positive effect on the job application process. A greater percentage of employers (50%) stated that the credential would have no effect on the job applicant process (Figure 12). In light of this information, workforce development organizations might approach employer groups again to gain a better understanding of what soft skills information in a resume or cover letter would have a positive impact on application processes.

CONCLUSION

Overall the survey and interview findings suggest that soft skills are very important to employers and to postsecondary schools. Research shows that soft skills are often better predictors of career success than technical skills. Local area employers have prioritized professionalism/integrity, reliability, communication, and teamwork as the top soft skill priorities for entry-level employment. The soft skills categories that are both high priorities for local employers and most lacking in job applicants are communication, problem solving/adaptability, and reliability.

While the research illustrated differences between three SJI focused sectors (manufacturing, healthcare, and office occupations) in terms of which soft skills are considered most important, more research could be done to replicate national sector-based studies locally to determine any variances in the findings.

Community college administrators and employers have common soft skills priorities and share similar concerns about the lack of certain skills in students and job applicants. On the other hand, there are a few areas where continued discussion on soft skills priorities might help both sets of stakeholders achieve their goals, particularly around oral communication skills and problem-solving skills.

The overlap in soft skill development best practices across disciplines suggests that the institutions researched here have come to similar conclusions about how to teach soft skills effectively. While it appears that some community colleges are using assessments, more research could be done concerning the extent to which they find the assessments helpful and how well they are able to incorporate findings into new policies and programs.

Finally, while most employers thought that creating a soft skills credential was an important task for community colleges and workforce development providers, less than half stated that a credential would have a positive effect on the job application process. Workforce development stakeholders may want to discuss these incongruous findings with employers as they move towards the creation of a soft skills credential.

This report provides practical information from employers and community colleges regarding the soft skills students and entry-level employees need to be successful in postsecondary education programs and on the job. It provides some guidelines for SJI and other workforce development training practitioners/policy advocates regarding soft skills priorities for employers, as well as unique priorities across three sectors.

Knowledge from these findings can help workforce organizations, community colleges, and employers re-align (where needed) a common set of soft skills priorities across postsecondary education and workplace settings. Finally, the descriptions of best practices in soft skills development from a variety of sources allows training providers to compare their strategies with other organizations across the US.

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