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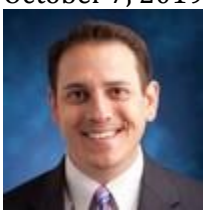

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A Skills-Based Approach to Student Success

If you work in education, you've probably heard or even uttered worries like "how are our students ever going to keep up with the current job market and rapidly advancing technology?", "are my students really graduating with all the capabilities they need in their careers?" or "what if all my students' career paths get replaced by AI?"

In this digital age, educators and learners should not suffer from a failure of imagination or defeatist attitude about the rapid advancement of technology and the apparent risks it could pose to employment. Rather than worrying about how our learners will *compete* with technology, we should help them *complement* it.

In order to help students keep pace with and even utilize technology to their professional advantage, we need to stop talking only about soft skills. Instead, educators should concentrate on the professional knowledge, employability skills, and technical abilities learners need to develop career-oriented capabilities. Below, I provide some concrete advice for educators and educational institutions who want their students to keep pace with modern technology and enjoy successful careers.

Filling Gaps with Skills-Based Education

As I explain in my Telos Educational Services animated video "The Insufficient Degree," both college graduates and unfilled job openings are both at record-breaking highs. This means that while many job candidates have college *degrees*, employers *can't* find applicants with the skills required to succeed in today's workplace. We call this the skills gap. In order to fill it, we need to move from degree-focused to *skills*-focused education and advisement. By asking young people about their career goals and helping them determine the skills needed to fulfill these, this subtle paradigm shift can help them determine which formal education or training path is the right choice for them. We can also provide them with more varied learning opportunities.

For example, in the traditional degree-based journey, a student who wanted to become an elected official would major in political science, but in a skills-based approach, this same student might participate in Toastmasters to improve her public speaking skills, intern with a city council member, take marketing classes at a local community college, volunteer to help manage a voter registration initiative, and help fundraise for a non-profit. These work-based learning activities could complement formal education offerings and would all provide abilities the student needs to truly succeed in her chosen career path.

Tech-Savvy Skills-Based Education

As educators, we should also consider how *our* capabilities and offerings can best complement technology. We need to pay attention to how students' experiences on their smartphones and in the retail or service sectors (e.g. Amazon, Uber, Postmates, etc.) are shaping their expectations. By better understanding their everyday lives and how they prefer to communicate, share, and purchase goods, we can foster more productive internal dialogues about how to best guide them toward completion of their educational goals and living-wage employment opportunities.

At one point, we in higher education focused on MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as a way to leverage technology in our curricula. We believed that these courses could make education more universally, democratically available, giving necessary knowledge and skills to the masses. However, in practice, we learned that most ended up being too granular and focused on a single skill or subject to change the world the way we had anticipated. More recently, there was a brief moment in which we thought that computer coding boot camps would change the world, but these programs, too, have proven to have limited utility due to their limited scope – as *Inc. magazine* put it, "some skills are too complex for short-term intensive training to be effective."

In today's educational and technological climate, we might consider how integrating technology with their studies could help keep learners engaged. This could include educational apps, interactive and asynchronous lectures, digital study groups, or classroom environments that incorporate (rather than prohibit) productive smartphone and tablet use. Career counselors could also focus on how to best help students intern, apprentice, and earn positions with top tech companies, in tandem with obtaining their educational goals, since these expanding organizations may be especially interesting to undergraduates who regularly use their products.

Colleges Can (and Should) Offer Both Bread and Roses

So often, colleges and higher educational institutions feel pressure to fit either in one box or another. Either, they focus on short shelf-life software skills or long shelf-life critical thinking capacities. They're either liberal arts colleges or technical schools. Too often, they either cater to traditional students, or they serve adult learners.

As a college professor and administrator, I have a secret to share: you *can* design credentials around both the short shelf-life and the long shelf-life. Shifting to a "learner," skills-based mindset does not mean we do away with degrees. These academic credentials are the ranks of learning. They represent flexibility in learning and a signal of an individual's ability to adapt, absorb information, and improve his or her capabilities. A degree signals a certain level of critical thinking ability to employees; but when embedded with industry credentials they also demonstrate skills mastery and real-word competency.

While we tend to love our "either/ors," this is a "both/and" situation. Educational institutions can position themselves to focus on long shelf-life areas, *infused* with short shelf-life competences and skills.

This is the way to resolve the much-lamented decline of the liberal arts and humanities. While STEM majors have increased (and probably will continue to), leading technology companies such as *Burning Glass* have noted that a liberal arts degree with 3-5 courses that focus on short shelf-life skills can increase a graduate's earning potential and employability. Some liberal arts majors can

typically catch up to technical jobs in terms of income within about a decade, but often with additional training.

Recent research indicates that learners need both a general education foundation *and* accompanying technical skills to help students apply what they have learned in an increasingly technological landscape. Basically, we need better balance in the curriculum. In his article for *EDUCAUSE Review*, Terry O'Banion explains: "my intent is to persuade educators—especially those working in community colleges—to set aside their partisan advocacy of general and liberal education or of career and technical education and to become advocates of an approach that bridges the divide. I call this an "Essential Education"- education that provides a quality experience for every student. An Essential Education is an integrated learning experience that incorporates the best content, knowledge, skills, and attitudes from both the hand and the head, the doing and the knowing, the skillful hand and the cultivated mind—in other words, an integrated learning experience that includes both "bread and roses." Students should enjoy both the intellectual "roses" of liberal arts and the practical "bread" of technical education.

Societal expectations tell the traditional, fresh-out-of-high-school 18-year-old to major in a STEM field to get a job. Both selective and non-selective universities are beginning to focus on practical degrees rather than liberal arts. Parents see the liberal arts and practical skills as an either/or calculation; their children will either graduate with a computer science degree that immediately gets them a job, or they'll end up unemployed with a philosophy degree (like me). They'll either enjoy "roses" or "bread." However, in today's new economy this is all a false dichotomy.

Higher education institutions can provide both a solid liberal arts foundation **and** practical skills to help students secure living-wage jobs. Schools can balance these needs and deliver outstanding instruction. We can offer Career Technical Education (CTE) credentials coupled with a general education core, and/or contextualize all learning while in meaningful work-based learning programs.

As California State University, Sacramento's Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy pointed out, "applied associate degrees are offered in all but two states, but are not offered in the California Community Colleges." This presents an opportunity for the Golden State to revolutionize education, especially since California Community Colleges enroll 25% of the country's community college students. By offering CTE credentials and applied associate degrees, we can guarantee that one in four American community college students get to enjoy both the "roses" and the "bread" that will help them enjoy brighter futures.

It's Time for a Skills-Based Approach

By making a few key changes, you can transform your curriculum and educational planning to better suit the demands of our twenty-first century learner. Our focus must be on giving students *practical*, *applicable* skills they can learn and then carry directly into the world. This doesn't mean we should forget about traditional liberal arts education or academics; it means we need to contextualize and integrate these essential educational experiences with applied technical learning.

Do you have questions about implementing a skills-based approach on your campus? Have you already begun and want to share your strategies? Let's start a dialogue! Feel free to comment below with your thoughts.