
15 The Future Has Gone Soft on Skills

Why Campuses Should Be Working Harder to Cement Personal and Social Development with Learning

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The conversation around twenty-first-century skills is getting old. Literally. Two decades into the twenty-first-century, every institution—whether community college, land-grant university, private liberal arts college, or the state school in the middle of nowhere—in one way or another is asking what a liberal education means *now*. That immutable *now*, emergent over the past twenty years, is the acknowledgment and growing appreciation that students are different, that the environment for learning is different (in good and not so good ways), and that the needs of employers continue to change.

We have known for some time that employers largely value broad skills over narrow job training.¹ That workforce advantage means employees are nimble enough to problem solve through technological changes, job redesign, or restructuring. It also means that college graduates can use a diverse skill set to navigate an increasingly complex, globally dependent job market and successfully maneuver through an average of nearly twelve career changes, half of which will occur when employees are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.² These abilities encompass a set of intellectual and practical skills, such as written and oral communication skills, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and information literacy, in addition to the ability to integrate and apply these proficiencies in various conditions or settings.

But something else is beginning to define workforce needs.

A person's efficacy in the workplace or in the world does not depend on intellectual, practical, and integrative skills alone. How individuals manage others and themselves in complex environments also matters. The attributes of these capacities often get discussed in terms of employees' interpersonal skills, such as the ability to work in teams or "with diverse groups,"³ or in terms of their individual capacities, like motivation, curiosity, or risk taking. If employers value graduates who can function effectively both *interpersonally* and *intrapersonally*, it is increasingly up to colleges and universities to provide those abilities. But the manner in which they are provided and to whom demands examination.

The Problem with the Term "Soft"

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defines a liberal education as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change," which is achieved through the development of "a sense of social responsibility, as well as . . . intellectual and practical skills . . . and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings."⁴

Implicit in this definition is the assumption of students' development of "soft skills," that is, a set of affective capacities or qualities of individuals that enable them to be productive, assured, introspective, and even empathetic. To be explicit about these skills is to recognize, as employers are beginning to do, that employees are even more effective when they persevere through failures, when they act with confidence, and when they reflect on their performance. Notably, these are similar to the capacities that faculty members often describe, sometimes wistfully, when talking about the "unmeasurable" skills that also contribute to student success.

Indeed, among the skills respondents ranked most desirable in the AAC&U's 2018 employer survey were the ability "to work independently (prioritize, manage time)" and to be "self-motivated, take initiative, and be proactive with ideas or initiatives."⁵ A study by Georgetown Univer-

sity's Center on Education and the Workforce has recognized the job market value of self-esteem and resilience.⁶

It has become commonplace to refer to these skills as “soft,” perhaps because they are “inherent” or “personal” or because their subjectivity eludes the usual assessment methods of quizzes and tests. Whatever the reason, labeling any set of skills, particularly those that are increasingly so important, as “soft” is problematic. “Soft” skills have historically been equated with the feminization of certain jobs and associated skills in the labor market. Female-dominated jobs, such as nurses, flight attendants, or primary school teachers, have been defined by their reliance on managing situations, managing one's emotions,⁷ and working well with others. What is “soft” about these jobs is that women tend to do them. The term “soft skills” serves to reinforce gender stereotypes about what women supposedly do best and so effortlessly that it renders the work they are *actually* doing as virtually invisible.⁸ The element of being unseen contributes to these skills being undervalued. The consequence of these abilities being invisible and undervalued is a correlation with the systematic devaluation of the jobs in the American labor market that rely on these types of skills and the very real economic (i.e., wage) consequences on the people, primarily women, who hold these jobs.⁹ Relatedly, references to the social sciences as “soft” and the natural sciences as “hard” are demarcations that implicitly attack the rigor of fields like sociology and psychology and underscore the growing feminization of these disciplines.

Thus, the emphasis on soft skills in today's workforce invites an exquisite tension: championing the importance of students' personal and social development while simultaneously labeling such abilities in a way that ultimately undermines their value. This tension also extends to how we recognize (or miss) the development of soft skills (i.e., personal and social development) within some of the most innovative, high-impact learning experiences happening across college campuses.

Just as the forces of a rapidly diversifying twenty-first-century economy have influenced the growing importance of soft skills, so too have they shaped the learning environments in which students will encounter

these skills. A commitment to students' personal and social development will require colleges and universities to grapple with the influences that have uniquely shaped higher education in this century. Those forces are driven by diversification, anxiety, stress, and the imperative to define what student success means and how to achieve it.

The Development of Soft Skills in a Changing Educational Environment

We have gained a much clearer picture of just how diverse students are in the twenty-first century. Today's students are both younger *and* older. The influx of students of traditional age into colleges and universities is due to increased numbers of students from historically underserved groups.¹⁰ The greatest area of consistent growth between 2000 and 2016 was among Hispanic students, whose enrollment in postsecondary institutions more than doubled.¹¹ Other underserved racial groups (African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, and American Indian and Alaska Native) boosted their enrollment by an average of 43 percent from 2000 to 2010.¹² Institutions of higher education are also increasingly being shaped by an influx of students over the age of twenty-four, as more adult students seek a postsecondary credential.¹³

Additionally, one-third of college students will transfer at least once, making movement across institutions much more common.¹⁴ Though the proportion of first-generation college students has declined over time, the size of this population is still noteworthy at about one-third of all college students.¹⁵ Altogether, the diversity of the student population in higher education demands that all institutions take notice. Not because diversity is a problem, but because it is a reckoning. Higher education's reflection of larger national demographic shifts does not simply require a greater awareness of those students traditionally underserved by higher education. It also requires understanding that those students' backgrounds, viewpoints, and cultural legacies and competence have been equally underserved.¹⁶ This means that the expression of the outcomes of a liberal education in general, and personal and social development in particular, must be encouraged to manifest in new ways.

Today's college students are also reporting greater levels of anxiety and stress than ever before. Data from the American College Health Association indicate that 52 percent of undergraduates reported feeling "things were hopeless" at some point in the previous twelve months, 86 percent reported feeling "overwhelmed by all they had to do," and 61 percent felt "overwhelming anxiety."¹⁷ The National Survey of College Counseling Centers reported a 44 percent increase in counseling services in 2014 from the previous year.¹⁸ By and large, counselors are responding to students' anxiety, which has far outpaced both depression and stress from relationships as the leading reason for visits to counseling centers since 2012.¹⁹

There is little doubt that increasing diversity and attention to students' mental health have affected the current environment of students' learning on college campuses. At the same time, growing attention has also been given to the positive benefits of the amount and quality of certain engaged learning experiences, often referred to as high-impact practices. Though many of the most common high-impact practices, such as learning communities, service learning, first-year seminars, and capstones, have existed for decades, the use of the term "high-impact practices" is a twenty-first-century coining. The inclusiveness of this single term to refer to a breadth of practices acknowledges the efficacy of these experiences in the aggregate, particularly for underserved students.²⁰ Though much has been written about the value of these experiences in achieving the intellectual and applied skills of a liberal education, relatively little systematic connection has been made between these practices and students' personal and social development.²¹ That could be because student development has traditionally been seen as the purview of student affairs professionals. But the growing recognition of the need for intra- and interpersonal capabilities (e.g., empathy, resilience, confidence, belonging) and the campus imperatives to expand high-impact practices provide an opening to link the two in a way that effectively takes the discussion of whole student development from the cocurriculum to the classroom and beyond. High-impact practices may

not just be the key to building students' cognitive skills; they may also be every bit as effective in building students' personal and social capacities.

The Link between Soft Skills and High-Impact Practices

A caveat to the efficacy of high-impact practices has always been that they be done “well.”²² This means recognizing the characteristics of the experiences themselves that contribute to the intentionality with which they transform students' learning and development. These characteristics are often thought of as the “quality” dimensions of high-impact practices.²³ Among the qualities posited are three core elements that highlight the inherent connection between high-impact practices and students' personal and social development: reflection, high levels of interaction, and high levels of feedback.²⁴ Reflection is vital for students to recognize instances of their learning in real time and the pathway of their learning over time. Doing this well, however, demands treating reflection as a skill to be developed over time through a series of reflection prompts, as opposed to a single reflection paper. The sequence of prompts should invite students to peel back layers of the experience.²⁵ Rather than asking “What did you do and how did you feel about it?” Carol Rodgers advocates for a four-part sequence that begins with students learning to be mindful in the moment of the experience itself.²⁶ Only then can they move to step two (describe the experience) and step three (analyze the experience from multiple viewpoints). It is not until the *fourth* step that students are asked to consider their own individual positionality and responses to the experience.

Reflection is also about personal discovery. Just as reflection provides a means for students to evaluate the path of their learning across experiences, it also helps students to understand who they are vis-à-vis their learning. Reflection enables students to consider their strengths and abilities, their limitations, and their own sense of purpose. Reflective discussions can occur as easily between students and faculty as they can between students and career services professionals. Evidence suggests that students will benefit most by having multiple conversations with a constellation of higher education professionals.²⁷ Ideally, students' en-

gement in high-impact practices will invite these reflections and discussions. Even better would be that reflection and discussion happen early and often, so that by the time a student begins looking toward a career path, they have had the opportunity to fully consider what they have learned in the classroom and what they have learned about themselves.

High-impact practices should also contain high levels of interaction with faculty, peers, community members, and campus staff. The more diverse these interactions, the better. Exposing students to different viewpoints forces them to reconcile their own perspectives with the views of others with whom they disagree. This quality component of high-impact practices will serve students well when, upon graduation, they are asked to work with colleagues in other parts of the world, of different faiths or sexual and political orientations, or of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Finally, high-impact practices should provide students with structured and consistent feedback. Feedback in any setting is a mechanism for, at minimum, telling students what they got right or wrong. In high-impact practices, consistent feedback builds resilience, motivating students to improve by illuminating the path forward. It also strengthens self-esteem and confidence by underscoring not just what was right but what was brilliant.

In important ways, each of these quality dimensions—reflection, interaction, and feedback—is relevant for the success of a generation of students entering college campuses from traditionally underserved backgrounds, whether they are first generation, low income, nonwhite, or some combination of all of these. High levels of reflection, interaction, and feedback can be the difference between a student leaving college and staying. With reflection comes the chance to recognize a student's voice and cultural wealth. With interaction comes the chance to build a community of their own and foster a sense of belonging. With feedback comes the chance to be seen as exceptional and college ready, even when a wider network of support may be lacking or nonexistent. We know that high-impact practices can be particularly effective for improving

retention and graduation rates of underserved students,²⁸ but we currently possess little understanding of exactly why. By explicitly linking the quality components of high-impact practices with students' personal and social development, we are getting closer to comprehending the full potential of these experiences.

Community Engagement as a High-Impact Thread to Soft Skills

Lists of the most common high-impact practices often contain references to service-learning courses and study abroad programs. These are the places in the curriculum and the cocurriculum where civic and community engagement usually live. But to confine civic or community engagement to a few programs is to miss the mark. Today's world is more globally connected than ever. Local issues are global issues. Domestic markets are internationally influenced. Communication skills do not stop at state or even continental borders. Students themselves are also more connected—to each other, to physical and virtual worlds, and to new modalities of expression. The extent of interconnectivity between environments and relationships makes civic and community engagement not just one specific high-impact practice but a potentially catalyzing component of *every* high-impact practice. Community engagement can be woven into first-year seminars, learning communities, capstone projects, or undergraduate research, providing applicability, timeliness, and perhaps even a boost to outcomes.²⁹

Though community engagement can be viewed as resource intensive, conceptualizing these activities as a robust, connected set of practices can be helpful. Community-engaged activities are often concurrent but siloed across multiple areas of campus life. For example, a single campus might have forms of community engagement that span service learning and study abroad programs; clinical rotations, practicums, or field placements; internships; and pockets of community-based research. Cocurricular community engagement is also siloed with students participating in volunteer initiatives, alternative spring break programs, and various club or campus ministry service projects. Each form of community engagement, curricular and cocurricular, is a potentially powerful

mechanism through which students can explore their personal and social development. These experiences would be even more powerful if they were thought of in the aggregate, rather than piecemeal.

At the core of any community-engaged experience is a rich opportunity for reflection, interaction, and feedback. This could be in the form of students' understanding another culture (whether local or global) or interacting with a community member, organizational partner, or business entity. An intentionally structured and organized community-engaged experience is also a powerful mechanism for students to explore who they are and to apply that learning in a real-world context. Additionally, through guided reflection, interaction, and feedback, students can be invited to explore their own sources of bias and misinformation. Such experiences help students to tether the problem-solving and critical-thinking skills gained in the classroom to actual "wicked" problems that by definition lack clear solutions, such as climate change, systems of social inequality, or democratic participation.³⁰ But community engagement is not a silver bullet for fully equipping students with personal and social development skills, nor is any other high-impact practice. What is needed is a more expansive view of how personal and social development skills are fostered across campus. This might include high-impact practices, like community engagement, but the scope of the practices should go even further. If colleges and universities are going to get serious about students' personal and social development, they must also align institutional missions, college-wide learning outcomes, faculty work, and assessment with these promising educational practices.

Taking on the Hard Part of Soft Skills: Definition, Implementation, Assessment

Although faculty members largely recognize the cross-disciplinary relevance of abilities such as written and oral communication skills, critical thinking, and information literacy, far more ambiguity exists when it comes to adding personal and social development to a list of general education or institutional outcomes. Nevertheless, national frameworks have begun to provide guidance for such articulations. For example, the

Lumina Foundation's beta Credentials Framework identifies personal skills, such as autonomy, responsibility, self-awareness, and reflectiveness, as essential components of students' overall skill set.³¹ The AAC&U has identified developing students' sense of "agency" as a guiding principle of its General Education Maps and Markers framework. Entire state university systems have also begun to recognize particular "noncognitive" skills, such as academic mindset and belonging.³²

Additionally, institutions have found pathways into discussions of personal and social development through connections to institutional core purposes or missions. Georgetown University, like many Jesuit universities, promotes self-care (*cura personalis*) as a defining principle of its mission. This mission-centered orientation provided leverage for launching the successful Engelhard Project, in which faculty infuse modules related to student well-being and personal development into traditional academic courses. Additionally, large-scale institutional commitments to well-being have fostered university-wide commitments to wellness and healthy-living programs and initiatives at George Mason University and the Healthy Campus initiative at Simon Fraser University. Finally, a handful of colleges and universities have explicitly identified well-being outcomes, such as "personal development" and "spiritual, physical, and mental health," among institutional or general education outcomes.³³

Another challenge in fostering personal and social development is the imposition of adding one more thing for faculty to do. Giving students opportunities for reflection, interaction, and feedback, not to mention all three, can feel like a substantial time commitment. Faculty alone should not be responsible for helping students to connect the dots between the development of their cognitive skills and certain affective or civic skills. The job is too great and classroom time too constrained. While as educators and academic advisors, faculty play a significant role in shaping students' personal and social development, an opportunity exists to explore a larger network of support for students' development of these skills. Mentoring programs, available on most campuses, are one type of resource. Whether peer, academic, or career, mentors pro-

vide support from which all students, and particularly those from increasingly diverse and underserved backgrounds, can benefit.³⁴ Holistic or team-based advising programs, such as Dominican University of California's integrative coaching program, Agnes Scott College's Summit program where each student chooses a "personal board of advisors," and LaGuardia Community College's advising teams are a few examples of this type of mentoring.³⁵

Finally, even if students' personal and social development skills can be articulated, championed, and reinforced, they still need to be assessed. This can be a challenge for any institutional learning outcome, but assessment can seem particularly nebulous when considering constructs like hope, flourishing, resilience, self-efficacy, growth mindset, and belonging. Though such skills are sometimes assumed to be unmeasurable, a number of reliable and valid instruments exist and have been widely deployed.³⁶

The connection of students' personal and social development to the classroom, however, suggests some linkage of assessment with students' demonstrated ability, perhaps through reflection papers, journals, or other efforts. This type of assessment complements standardized instruments that, while valid and reliable, are based on students' self-reported feelings and behaviors. Direct assessment offers the opportunity to expand the evidence base by explicitly linking these skills with classroom learning through assignments and faculty feedback. The AAC&U VALUE rubrics, released in 2009, provide a resource for the direct assessment of some of these proficiencies, particularly as they relate to teamwork and civic skills, such as civic engagement, ethical reasoning, and intercultural knowledge and competence.³⁷ Though VALUE rubrics for personal and social development outcomes do not yet exist, the rubric template provides a model for how such assessments might be constructed. Two such campus-based examples are Tidewater Community College's rubric for "personal development" and Chattanooga State Community College's rubric to evaluate "work ethic."³⁸ Both possess a structure and layout similar to the VALUE rubrics.

Looking Forward: Changing the Narrative for Student Learning and Success

Based on what we know two decades into the twenty-first century, here are some hopeful predictions for the changing narrative in higher education. Colleges and universities will increasingly highlight the ways in which a college degree is a certification of students' ability and confidence not just to get a job but to nimbly move between career paths. Campus narratives will emphasize the ways in which students are prepared to join, manage, and lead within a diverse global workforce. Higher education as a whole will be viewed as the training ground for equipping students with the self-esteem to get things done, the perseverance to stare down crises, and the risk taking to innovate, precisely because they have had a sandbox in which to practice confronting failure and persisting.

Supporting students' personal and social development will more fluidly and authentically connect the curriculum and cocurriculum. The inertia that keeps these two halves of the campus separate will disappear under the weight of resource realignment and the desire for a holistic student experience. Even as faculty "own the curriculum," faculty and student affairs professionals will develop greater understanding of the ways in which they mutually share responsibility for students' learning. In part, this will be through the understanding that contributions to high-impact practices are a collective, not a singular, endeavor. Additionally, campuses will find new innovations and recognition for advising and mentoring programs, possibly as part of those high-impact practices. As the campus community works together in service of students' cognitive, personal, and social development, new understandings of equity will be forged by honoring how students' affective strengths are fundamental to their success.

Ultimately, the coming decades will recognize that who students are and how they feel—about the world, about each other, and about themselves—is every bit as important as what they know and can do. The first step is to stop calling any of this "soft." It is going to be hard. It is going to

be rigorous. It is going to be consequential. And what we know of liberal education in the twenty-first century will be better because of it.

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