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National Preferences in Business and Communication Education: A Survey Update

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PERHAPS the key word for American Higher Education for the twenty-first century is assessment—the “A” word. How can we assure the quality of higher education? The linear thinking (that tomorrow can be viewed as minor refinement of the present) that all too often has guided educational change is now very much in question.

Particularly called into question is the sufficiency of university students amassing 124 plus credit hours to graduate—relatively divided between their major, their minor and electives, and their general education requirements. We propose a substitution—the notion of a competency-based model sustained by multiple assessments of: (1) the product as it is developed (the student); (2) the clientele’s wishes (those who would hire the students); and (3) the process itself (the educational program). We believe this model would provide a strategic change to meet the educational needs of the twenty-first century.

It should be less expensive for corporate training departments of the future to have a part in nurturing university graduates. Quality assurances may result in articulation agreements between businesses and specific universities where the university graduates of approved programs will be given employment preferences. Whatever the future linkage, external assessment of the product will affect the process of education. Obviously we do not want to ignore the fact that a university education is not merely “*training*” for a job. Rather, it is education for life. Skills and techniques alone will not suffice. Further, we recognize that many business managers return to the university for additional liberal arts education. While we do not advocate university curricula being directed by exterior forces, we do think it is important for academia to pay careful attention to the “market value” or our efforts.

Burt Roberts (1994) of The National Alliance of Business (NAB) concludes: “While millions of dollars have been poured into education during the past decade, the money had

been used to prop up the old, ineffective model, rather than to take a new approach" (p. 6). He indicates over half of the companies NAB surveyed reported serious problems finding applicants for entry-level positions who possessed even the basic skills they consider as the most important in making hiring decisions. Roberts further notes, "America's global competitiveness hinges on the skill level of all workers" (p. 6). Because of these factors, we are concerned about what preparation employers desire for employees they hire and promote.

We began our search for answers of ways to assist our graduates by conducting a review of literature regarding expectations of business hiring practices of university graduates. This review was expanded by a pilot study of the greater Kansas City area. We asked four basic questions: (1) what factors most helped university graduates obtain employment; (2) what specific factors or skills were most important for successful job performance; (3) which university courses of study are most valuable in preparing for entry-level management or administration; and (4) what would be the ideal mix of skills for an entry-level manager.

The present study, sampled during Spring 1994, replicates a Curtis, Winsor and Stephens 1989 study. The specific data base included a random sample of 1000 subjects obtained from Hugo Dunhill Mailing Lists, Inc., a firm specializing in direct mailing lists. One major impetus for the current study was the continuing debate as to what should be included in the university studies component at our university. Many people have written to us indicating that our previous data were extremely helpful in developing and supporting content proposals at their universities.

The 1989 article provided an extensive summary of background on the above questions. This article (1) extends the research review of literature before and since that study and (2) indicates the preferences of business professionals in 1994.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Harris and Thomlison (1983) indicate the top three areas where additional communication education appears to be needed—listening, motivating people, and handling grievances. The respondents saw these three areas as most important to supervisors and middle management personnel. They conclude, "Communication education is in the position to respond to the legitimate needs of the business-bound student" (p. 267).

Smeltzer, Glab, and Colen, (1983) indicate that business schools in the U.S. have gone beyond requiring undergraduates just completing courses in business writing and correspondence to focus upon aspects of interpersonal, small group, and organizational communication. Sorenson, Savage, and Orem (1990) put it succinctly: "In short, today's business schools exhibit strong interest in the field of communication" (p. 148).

Willer, Kristen, and Anderson (1987) compare what is taught about organizational communication and what is practiced in organizations. The researchers find seven communication functions present in most organizational communication training—transmitting creative ideas, gathering relevant information, explaining to others, managing conflict, persuading, cooperation, and decision-making. Their results indicate "that employees do judge these communication functions as important to the accomplishment of their jobs" (p. 110).

Hultz and Gardner (1988) report on a project by which recruiters used information to make decisions regarding interviewee selections. Data were collected from recruiters seeking a variety of majors. Indications from the project indicate recruiters relied heavily on major grade-point average and communication skills to determine who should be interviewed. According to the report: When comparing the characteristics they reported using and the characteristics they actually used, recruiters believed they were using a wide variety of factors with relatively equals weights. In actuality, they primarily relied on major GPA and communication skills when making decisions (p. 2). The authors conclude, "Greater

emphasis throughout the academic community needs to be placed on interpersonal and communication skills" (p. 3).

Kim and Wright (1989) report forty-six items considered very important for the former vocational students for their current job performance and for their career advancement. The findings of former vocational students indicate the importance of competencies in the areas of interpersonal skills, communication skills, and problem solving (p. viii).

Sorenson, Savage and Oren (1990) note that the role of communication instruction in colleges and schools of business has received increased emphasis in the last two decades because of the requirements of accrediting agencies such as the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business and the needs indicated by employers. Sorenson et al. also tell us that most respondents in their study, "preferred Ph.D.s who have content expertise in first, business education and then, management, speech communication, and organizational communication" (p. 154). Sorenson et al. indicate the realities of campus politics when they say "communication faculty can engage in university governance procedures to insure that communication courses are taught only in communication departments. In some situations, this defensive strategy is risky politically. Many schools of business have been offering business communication courses for as long or longer than the courses listed by communication departments. Moreover, although this approach may limit the expansion of in-house business communication courses, it probably will not control the *de facto* content of those courses (p. 158).

Maxson and Hair (1990) note that employers want employees who have fundamental grounding in basic skills (communication and computation), positive attitudes and orientation toward work, sound study habits and retention capabilities, and specialized application of basic skills (vocational, technical, scientific, and managerial) (p. 4).

Leslie (1992) cites an American Society for Training and Development document *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want*, which proposed to identify the minimal, broad educational standards that are necessary for the U.S. to compete. These standards include: (1) knowing how to learn; (2) competence in reading, writing and computation; (3) communication: listening and oral communication; (4) adaptability: creative thinking and problem solving; (5) personal management: self esteem, goal setting/motivation and personal/career development; (6) group effectiveness: interpersonal skills, negotiation, teamwork; and (7) influence: organizational effectiveness and leadership (p. 6).

Sanders (1994) cites the report, *Employer Satisfaction*, which involved 127 employers from industry, commerce, and government. Researchers conducted sixty-two, in-depth interviews from the group of employers. They concluded that teamwork is the most important skill required of graduates and "that employers should be more involved in course development" (p. S1).

The National Alliance of Business (1994) had 673 companies respond to their survey of small businesses (fewer than 500 employees). Their survey used skills identified by the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). Only 16 percent said they were satisfied with the education of new employees, and many reported a significant drop in the reading and math skill of applicants over the years. Bert Roberts, chairman of NAB, notes reports from professors in a dozen countries, who were asked to rate their students on their math, writing, and speaking skills. His conclusions should concern us all: American students ranked near the bottom.

The results of the NAB study (1994) focused on specific skills. The skills were reported in two categories: (1) employers who believe skill is important; and (2) employers who believe finding workers with the skill is a problem. From examination of their "Workers Lack Crucial Skills" chart, skills mentioned in order of importance are: (1) listening; (2) interpersonal communication; (3) resource management; (4) math; (5) speaking; (6) reading; (7) writing; (8) technology; and (9) information. From the same chart, skills in which

employers believe workers to be deficient are: (1) resource management; (2) writing; (3) listening; (4) math; (5) speaking; (6) interpersonal; (7) information; (8) reading; and (9) technology (p. 6). The study demonstrates the shortfall between expectations of college graduates and the skills perceived that they possess.

Applebome (1995) notes survey results reported by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Work Force at the University of Pennsylvania and the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. These findings indicate a lack of confidence in schools and universities to produce needed skills in young workers. Applebome reports: Specifically, when asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 the factors they use in making hiring decisions, employers ranked at the top applicants' attitudes, communication skills and work experience. They ranked at the bottom applicants' academic performance and the reputation of schools attended, and, at the very bottom, recommendations from teachers (p. C8). This study was based on plant managers or site managers at 3,000 locations nationwide with more than twenty workers, including office, constructions sites, and factories.

METHOD

Participants

A survey questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1000 Human Resource Managers whose names were obtained from Hugo Dunhill Mailing Lists, Inc. The respondents represented several types of organizations including corporate, public, financial, service, insurance, retail, and wholesale. The questionnaire was designed to collect data regarding the hiring practices, job performance criteria, specific course values, and the ideal management profile. A follow-up questionnaire was sent. The return rate was thirty-seven percent.

Instrumentation

The instrument was patterned after the questionnaire used in the Curtis, Winsor, and Stephens (1989) study. A five-point graphic rating scale was provided for raters to indicate the relative importance of each item appearing in the questionnaire. An ordinal ranking by mean scores will be reported.

RESULTS

The data in Table 1 indicate that the most frequent factors deemed important in aiding graduating college students obtain employment are basic oral and written communication skills. Three of the top four—public speaking, listening, and enthusiasm—largely are oral communication skills. The importance of written communication competency had increased from fourth to second place with this survey. Clearly, school attended, grade-point average, participation in campus/community activities, and the accreditation of the program of study appear of less interest in this survey. However, only school attended had an average score of under 3.0, indicating each factor was rated of importance. The greatest changes in positions from our previous study were with written communication, work experience, part-time or summer employment, and recommendations moving up two or more places and grade-point average moving down five places.

TABLE 1
 Factors Most Important in Helping
 Graduating College Students Obtain Employment

Rank/Order	Factors/Skills Evaluated	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Oral (speaking) communication	4.667	1
2	Written communication skills	4.321	4
3	Listening ability	4.293	2
4	Enthusiasm	4.260	3
5	Technical competence	4.176	5
6	Work experience	4.071	8
7	Appearance	3.931	6
8	Poise	3.878	7
9	Resume	3.749	9
10	Part-time or summer employment	3.493	12
11	Specific degree held	3.308	10
12	Leadership in campus/community activities	3.290	14
13	Recommendations	3.248	16
14	Accreditation of program activities	3.194	13
15	Participation in campus/community activities	3.184	15
16	Grade-point average	3.168	11
17	School attended	2.648	17

Table 2 reports the relative importance of factors/skills essential for successful job performance. The top five factors appear to be directly related to communication skills. With the exception of enthusiasm moving up to fifth place and persistence/determination moving down to fourth, the top-rated items remain the same from our previous study. Items such as resume, school attended, physical attractiveness, letters of recommendation, grade-point average, and specific degree held all remained at the level of lesser importance garnering scores of under a 3.0 average.

TABLE 2
 Factors/Skills Important For Successful Job Performance

Rank/Order	Factors/Skills Rated as Important	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Interpersonal/human relations skills	4.593	1
2	Oral (speaking) communication skills	4.515	2
3	Written communication skills	4.346	3
4	Enthusiasm	4.265	5

5	Persistence/determination	4.110	4
6	Technical competence	4.088	6
7	Work experience	3.988	8
8	Personality	3.870	7
9	Poise	3.807	10
10	Dress/grooming	3.750	9
11	Interviewing skills	3.454	11
12	Specific degree held	2.936	12
13	Grade-point average	2.681	14
14	Letters of recommendation	2.604	17
15	Physical attractiveness	2.604	13
16	School attended	2.258	16
	Resume (excluded in current study)		15

In Table 3, the mean responses on the five-point, graphic rating scales indicate that written and oral communication skills are most important. Three of the top four—interpersonal communication, public speaking, and written communication were emphasized. Management remained as the third most important course for the entry-level manager. The greatest change from the previous study was the drop in importance of public relations, computer programming, and production management and the increase in ranking of business law—up five places.

The lowest ranked courses include life sciences, political science, mass communication, power and technology, and humanities, fine and liberal arts. These rankings remained relatively constant between the two studies.

TABLE 3
Courses of Importance for Entry-level Managers

Rank/Order	Courses	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Written communication	4.428	1
2	Interpersonal communication	4.351	2
3	Management	4.043	3
4	Public Speaking	3.936	4
5	Ethics in management	3.930	5
6	Personnel management courses	3.822	6
7	Financial management	3.700	7
8	Marketing	3.480	9
9	Public relations	3.479	12
10	Accounting	3.386	11
11	Mathematics	3.362	10
12	Business law	3.361	17
13	Computer programming	3.346	8
14	Statistics	3.309	14
15	Social and behavioral sciences	3.261	16

16	Production management	3.243	13
17	Economics	3.194	15
18	Humanities, fine and liberal arts	2.859	19
19	Power and technology	2.761	18
20	Mass communication	2.709	20
21	Political science	2.658	21
22	Life sciences	2.536	22

Table 4 reflects the mean ratings from highest to lowest importance for an ideal balance of traits/skills a young manager should possess to advance in an organization. Listening took the most dramatic rise to the top of the ratings from a previous fourth place. The top four items remained the same—ability to listen effectively and give counsel, ability to work well with others one-on-one, ability to work well in small groups, and ability to gather accurate information from others to make a decision—all oral communication variables.

Consistently the ideal management profile indicates ability to use business machines, knowledge of accounting, knowledge of marketing, knowledge of management theory and knowledge of finance as important, but of lesser importance than other traits/skills.

TABLE 4
Ideal Management Profile

Rank/Order	Trait/Skill	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Ability to listen effectively and counsel	4.662	4
2	Ability to work well with others one-on-one	4.641	1
3	Ability to work well in small groups	4.598	3
4	Ability to gather accurate information from others to make a decision	4.483	2
5	Ability to write effective business reports	4.311	6
6	Ability to give effective feedback (appraisal)	4.293	5
7	Knowledge of job	4.126	7
8	Ability to present a good public image for the organization	4.068	8
9	Ability to use computers	3.928	9
10	Knowledge of finance	3.379	11
11	Knowledge of management theory	3.326	10
12	Knowledge of marketing	3.277	12
13	Knowledge of accounting	3.189	13
14	Ability to use business machines	3.137	14

DISCUSSION

From the results of this and the previous study, it appears that the skills most valued in the contemporary job-entry market are communication skills. The skills of listening, oral communication (both interpersonal and public), written communication and the trait of enthusiasm are indicated to be the most important. Again, it would appear to follow that university officials wishing to be of the greatest help to their graduates in finding employment would make sure that basic competencies in oral and written communication are developed. Courses in listening, interpersonal, and public communication would form the basis of meeting the oral communication competencies. One way to meet the written communication expectation would be to include courses in rhetorical and business writing.

Further, training in interviewing skills would be in order to help university graduates maximize their appearance and personality projection as well as gather information necessary for appropriate decision making. Additionally, interviewing courses also provide assistance in developing a list of references, increasing resume quality, enhancing interview poise, etc.

Such factors/skills as technical competence, specific degree held, grade-point average, part-time or summer employment, accreditation of program, and school attended appear to be regarded as less important.

The ideal management profile results are congruent with the prerequisite for hiring and for successful job performance. Also, the specific course values tend to further complement this profile. We emphasize that employers do recognize that efficient communication skills are tantamount to success in the business organization. An imperative to provide this training in general education and throughout the curriculum is clear. Data analysis indicated the extreme importance of young managers to develop added competencies in interpersonal communication.

IMPLICATIONS

Clearly, employers expect a solid grounding in communication skills for successful entry-level hires. In particular, it is evident that stronger emphasis should be given to training in listening and interpersonal communication. If students do not have the understanding and skills these courses provide, they will lack the "outcomes" necessary for effective functioning in the job market, much less the competencies and experiences important to functioning as a productive family member or citizen in our democratic society.

We believe that business colleges and departments of communication could be served best by working collaboratively to provide the communication skills and knowledge essential for successful managers. Courses could be listed in both departments and team teaching should be encouraged. Unquestionably, managerial success depends on competencies in interpersonal and public communication as well as the ability to listen effectively and counsel, to work well with others one-to-one and in small groups and to write effective business reports. Given the number of complaints we hear from supervisors about the deficiencies of employees in these skill areas, it is clear, as we engage in the assessment of outcomes-oriented education, several of the outcomes that must be developed, taught, and assessed are communication based. Moreover, since teamwork, or the ability to work well together in the group setting is clearly an important skill required of graduates, we need to practice what we teach and involve employers in course development. Technical knowledge, whether it be machine based or specific knowledge in areas such as accounting or marketing, is of lessor importance than the communication skills essential in human relations.

Applebome (1995) notes the degree to which employers are divorcing themselves from the schools. Clearly the "supply side and demand side" must respect one another and cooperate in developing a product both sides can endorse.

Utilizing a professional advisory council is one excellent means of soliciting input from prospective employers on curricular matters. Curtis, Graves, and Winsor (1991) note evolving an effective curriculum to meet the changing demands in the preparation of communication practitioners is the primary reason for establishing and maintaining an advisory council" (p. 510). We echo that rationale and strongly urge communication and management departments to utilize this invaluable resource in course development and refinement. While we recognize that employers are a heterogeneous group with varied views of what graduates need, their input certainly is one important indicator of a quality program. We believe that a university education is not merely training for a job and that no outside agency should ever be allowed to dictate university curricula. A university education is for life and, among other purposes, is preparation for participation in democracy. However, an awareness of the potential for cooperation with other stakeholders is important in addressing the needs of our graduates so they can compete successfully in the workplace of the twenty-first century.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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