

UNIVERSITY *of* MONTEVALLO

QEP PROPOSAL



**PROFESSIONAL
& CAREER
DEVELOPMENT**

OVERVIEW

Students and employers agree that career readiness, and so-called “soft skills,” are necessary to obtain and perform well in a job post-graduation. Yet, Stewart, Wall, and Marciniac (2016) found that **although students are confident in their soft skills, employers are less so**. The 2019 NACE Job Outlook further supports this gap in graduate and employer perspective. According to the report, critical thinking/problem solving, teamwork/collaboration, professionalism/work ethic, and oral/written communications remain as the top four most essential career competencies as rated by employers. When asked to rate recent graduates on eight career readiness competencies, as defined by NACE, employers ranked the top four demonstrated competencies as teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, critical thinking/problem solving, and oral/written communication—several of the competencies demonstrated a marked difference between the rank of need and demonstrated proficiency (NACE, 2019).

The University of Montevallo 2018 National Survey of Student Engagement Snapshot (NSSE, hereafter) reveals multiple shortfalls as we compare our institutional student data with our peer group members in the Council of Public Liberal Arts College (COPLAC, hereafter) (NSSE Snapshot, 2018). Analysis of three years’ worth of our own student learning outcomes assessment data suggests **gaps between desired and actual levels of professionalism** in a number of academic programs (QEP meeting minutes, 2019)

The problem, then, is that graduating students are not demonstrating the necessary skill set to perform well, and then to advance, in the workforce, despite what the students themselves may think.

PROFESSIONAL & CAREER DEVELOPMENT DEFINED

This proposal supports a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that focuses on professional/career development and the refinement of soft skills, i.e., collaboration, managing time and self, punctuality, listening, writing, and delivering presentations (list not exhaustive). Both public and employer perception and research literature (SHRM, 2015; SHRM, 2019; Deepa & Seth, 2013; Stewart, Wall & Marciniac, 2016) strongly suggest undergraduate education provide more professional development opportunities for students. “Schools can’t continue to deliver an expensive credential that is not seen as delivering a viable path to a career—no matter what the long-term value” (DeLong, 2014).

Employers are increasingly frustrated at what they see as a growing problem with graduates’ soft skills (Stewart, Wall & Marciniac, 2016). Soft skills are defined as those non-technical competencies associated with one’s personality, attitude, and ability to interact effectively with others (i.e., to be optimally employable). These skills were believed to be as valuable in the workplace as hard skills – technical, tangible, measurable competencies.

They “are deemed essential for professional success and so should appear alongside required hard skills, education, and other relevant candidate qualifications.”

The Society of Human Resources Management (2015) found in a survey of employers that a number of career related skills are wanting in recent college graduates seeking entry level positions.



Applied Skills 2015 College Graduate Job Seekers Are Lacking

Applied Skill	Percentage
Professionalism/work ethic	43%
Relationship building/soft skills	29%
Business acumen	28%
Written communications	26%
Critical thinking/problem-solving	26%
Leadership	18%
Lifelong learning/self-direction	16%
Teamwork/collaboration	12%
Coaching skills	9%
Flexibility/openness to new experience	9%

Note: n = 395. Respondents who answered “don’t know” were excluded from this analysis. Percentages do not total 100% due to multiple response options.

The Hiring of 2015 College Graduates ©SHRM 2015 24

A 2019 SHRM study noted that, “Employers can’t solve the skills gap issue alone; they need support from education systems to build talent pools with skills relevant to today’s business needs. While some organizations have worked directly with education partners to build talent pipelines, most are reliant upon education systems identifying and developing the needed skills of the future workforce on their own.”

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) states, “A liberal arts education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.” Our proposed QEP will build upon these intellectual and practical skills that will not only benefit students during their time at the University of Montevallo but also in their post-university lives.

ANALYSIS OF UM'S INSTITUTIONAL DATA

The University of Montevallo 2018 NSSE data reveals multiple shortfalls as we compare our institutional student data with our COPLAC peers. Highly significant to this proposal, results indicate a gap related to applying facts, theories, or methods from their academic studies to practical, everyday problems or new situations. **This topic proposal envisions the increased use of experiential learning and engagement with real-world situations that would provide the opportunity for more critical learning activities and knowledge application across contexts.**

Analysis of student learning outcomes (SLO) assessment reports from across our four colleges (Arts & Sciences, Business, Education & Human Development, and Fine Arts) indicates that multiple programs focus on professional development for students' post-Montevallo lives. Some examples include:

- Graduates will demonstrate appropriate presentation of self in a variety of contexts. (CFA)
- Develop skills to pursue practicum opportunities off campus including business communication and networking; audition and interview technique; and office and rehearsal room etiquette and professionalism. (CFA)
- Graduates will develop leadership and interpersonal skills in a team environment. (COB)
- Graduates will demonstrate ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible behavior. (COB)
- Graduates will be effective communicators. Students successfully demonstrate ability to present predetermined content areas linking to course materials and management models. (COB)
- Graduates demonstrate basic preparation for the professional job market. (CAS)
- Graduates understand expectations of professions in the humanities and social sciences, i.e. ethics, plagiarism, and letters of recommendation. (CAS)
- Graduates work with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation. (COE)
- Graduates engage in ongoing professional learning and use evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice, particularly the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (learners, families, other professionals, and the community) and adapts practice to meet the needs of each learner. (COE)

Clearly, our academic programs value professional and career development for graduates. However, as stated previously, institutional data indicates gaps persist between desired and realized outcomes in these areas (QEP meeting minutes, March 2019). With institutionally supported enhancement, we believe programs can close, or at least reduce, these achievement gaps.

TOPIC RELEVANCE TO UM'S MISSION STATEMENT

An important quality of any QEP is that it connects to a university's mission (SACSCOC, 2019). A key element of UM's mission is that it should "...provide to students...an educational experience of high quality...designed for their *intellectual and personal growth in the pursuit of meaningful employment and responsible, informed citizenship.*" This professional/career development QEP intends to provide a coordinated, campus-wide effort to make our students more career-ready upon graduation and able to transition to either the workforce or continued graduate studies. As some of our NSSE data indicates shortcomings in key areas of a liberal arts tradition (time spent preparing and reading for class, evaluative abilities, application of learned materials, close working with a faculty mentor), this proposed QEP will help build capacity for increased professionalism while on campus and in preparation for life after graduation.

STUDENT POPULATIONS INFLUENCED BY THIS QEP

This QEP will target all student populations at the University of Montevallo with the rationale that this QEP is accretional: as students develop professional/soft skills they will also become better students throughout their years at the University.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

- Example **general outcomes:** developing a resume, crafting professional emails, exhibiting conflict resolution techniques.
- Example **discipline-specific outcomes:** ratings of professional skills during an internship experience, acceptance into a performance group or artistic show, or completion of service learning outcomes.

INTEGRATION THROUGH CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMMING

Implementation will involve both curricular and programmatic integration to strengthen the professional development of UM students with real-world learning experiences. Potentially, each college could develop a program within the college (or within departments) to offer programming on professionalism/soft skills and career development (mirroring the Stephens College of Business Center for Professional Practice to the degree possible within each area). In doing so, each college will utilize workshops through the Career Development Center and alumni experts through Alumni Affairs.

Integration of professionalism and soft skills could include but is not limited to:

- General Education Courses
- First-Year Experience
- “Introduction to the Major” Courses (where they exist)
- Advising

The next step would focus on providing all students a professional experiential learning/career development opportunity through:

- Capstone Courses
- Undergraduate Research
- Study Away/Study Abroad
- Co-curricular Learning
- Service Learning
- Career Planning Programs
- Internships

While certain academic programs lend themselves to experiential learning more than others, each area should capitalize on the infrastructure of co-curricular learning opportunities within and beyond the classroom to enhance students’ sense of professionalism and career development.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ASSESSMENT

Assessment of skills could occur through rubrics, behavioral rating scales (novice to professional), or portfolios designed to document a student’s progression toward professional competency. Examples include the number of internships or job offers secured; ratings by internship supervisors and/or employers; ratings of professional presentations or ethics assignments; and peer ratings of communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork skills during a group project.

TABLE I: TOP 10 SOFT SKILLS EMPLOYERS SEEK IN COLLEGE GRADUATES

Skill	Employer %	% Employers feel college grads well prepared	% College grads feel well prepared	% Students surveyed feel well prepared
Hart Research Associates:				
Verbal communication	85	28	62	72.4
Teamwork	83	37	64	83.6
Written communication	82	27	65	84.1
Ethical judgment / decision making	81	30	62	65.4
Critical/analytical thinking	81	26	66	86.9
Applying knowledge & skills to real world	80	23	59	--
Problem-solving	70	24	59	87.9
Locating, organizing, and evaluating info	68	29	64	--
Innovation / creativity	65	25	57	--
Staying current on changing technologies	60	37	46	--
NACE:				
Leadership	80.1			
Teamwork	78.9			
Written communication	70.2			
Problem-solving	70.2			
Verbal communication	68.9			
Work ethic	68.9			
Initiative	65.8			
Analytical / quantitative	62.7			
Flexibility / adaptability	60.9			
Technical	59.6			

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