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The Purpose Of The Present Study

The purpose of the initial phase of the study sought to identify a set of skills that meet employer expectations prior to entering the workplace. The second phase identifies skills that graduates felt were lacking when entering the workplace after graduation. This research contributes to the literature by also identifying how educators and businesses can proactively collaborate to foster these skill sets. Merging the ideas and input of business managers into the academic curriculum allows a blending of theory and practice to aid in student transition. The researchers also explore appropriate learning environments that generate postsecondary students into successful workers.

According to a national agency, one of the top ten higher education state policy issues for 2013 includes economic and workforce development (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2013). The term college is used throughout this study to include all higher learning institutions. Graduate students entering the workplace in positions of pharmacy technician, health administration, teachers, and so forth, discussed the skills that would have prepared the graduates to secure higher-level positions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Just as the common core state standards seek to prepare students for college and career readiness, universities should prepare students to enter the workforce. David Conley (2007) identified four critical dimensions of college readiness that contributes to the Common Core State Standards. The areas include contextual skills and awareness, academic behaviors, key content, and key cognitive strategies.

According to Conley (2007), contextual skills and awareness includes an understanding of how the college system works and includes the norms, values and interpersonal skills needed. Academic behaviors include using self-monitoring skills to matriculate into the culture of the college and navigating successfully. Key content skills include students' ability to successfully pass end-of-course exams or college admissions exams. Conley proposes that these types of exams are necessary in order to align college level and high school courses and increase student transition. Key cognitive strategies, according to Conley, consider the intellectual behaviors that students develop to build effective critical thinking habits (Barber, Castro, Bragg, 2010). Colleges should seek opportunities to build on these dimensions and identify critical areas of workforce readiness to strengthen the connection between education, economic and workforce development.

Additionally, the National Board of Professional Teachers (NBPT) proposes that master teachers know how to "seek and build relationships with community partners" (National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, n.d.) However, too often students felt unprepared due to a lack of practical and field experience. Jones and Kelly (2007) propose that policymakers pay more attention to the relationship of education in meeting state economic and workforce goals. Some states are beginning to take action to remediate student unpreparedness for college. The Illinois general assembly passed the College and Career Readiness Act and higher learning institutions are implementing support for student workforce readiness (Taylor, Linick, Reese, Baber, and Bragg, 2012). Brown (2000) indicates that job security is now related to career management and resilience. As the world of work evolves, employees are becoming more responsible for personal professional growth. Therefore, colleges should seek to align courses to meet entry level work force positions as well as higher level positions.

In earlier research, Magnusson and Bernes (2002) proposed interviewing students as a precursor to developing career planning programs. The authors posit understanding students' needs are significant to educators designing of career enhancement programs. The research shows the relationship of students from grades 7 through 12 which is significant to the university experience and contributes information regarding the resources that students feel would be most helpful in making the transition from school to work. This correlates with Conley's (2007) research on the critical dimensions of college readiness

There is conflict between what the students want to transition into the workforce and what the universities provided (Currie, 2008). The authors suggest that the students' perceptions of the future workplace are not accurate. Undergraduates' expectations are more positive than the employment outcomes. Some students underestimate the

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importance of interviews, letters of reference, GPA and social skills while overestimating the starting salaries in the chosen fields. Colleges can increase student awareness of these readiness factors.

Previous studies support collaboration as an important component to meeting the challenging needs of a diverse population (Akin, 2007). Community businesses that are willing to collaborate with educational institutions to aid the schools in preparing students to transition into the workplace should be sought by the colleges. According to Akin and Neumann (2013), identifying proactive collaboration strategies to support students is a first step to addressing marginalization of students regarding academic success. For that reason, research on students' perceptions of personal readiness to enter the workforce is an important part of the literature review and research for this study. Experiential learning is examined as an evidenced-based approach to teaching and learning to best prepare and transition students from college to career.

According to Archer (2004), the inconsistency of college career services and a student's willingness to access these services necessitate researching the issue of student readiness for the workforce. Designing practical learning activities, in collaboration with companies, within the course curriculum provides student access to career and workforce readiness.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of graduates who transitioned into the workplace. A phenomenological design was used to gain a better comprehension of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). This research design was appropriate for capturing the emerging language of the study.

Data Collection

The data were collected through interviews. The interview transcripts were reviewed and coded to define themes and substantial accounts, experiences and suggestions. The central research question of exploration was: "What can educators and teachers do to help students prepare for and transition into the workplace?"

The research methodology included one-on-one telephone interviews with 16 recent graduates who entered the workplace. The qualitative method encouraged the researcher to answer the questions of how, why, or what is causing an issue (Yin, 1993). The transcripts were coded to determine the themes and significant statements. The surveys and interviews were analyzed until no new themes were introduced and sample saturation was achieved.

Researchers carefully selected participants who could discuss the academic-to-workplace transition. The telephone interviews composed of open-ended questions and the answers were evaluated by common themes and order of significance. The qualitative data emerged and frequency of themes was considered.

FINDINGS

Demographics

The academic majors of the recent graduates that were interviewed consisted of business or management (37.5%), healthcare (31.25%), criminal justice (18.75%), education (12.5%), and sociology (6.25%).

Skills Needed From The Recent Graduates' Perspective

The main skills that recent graduates believed to be essential for the workplace were computer software skills, such as Microsoft Excel©, and understanding how to use a database, Photoshop, InDesign, and coding in HTML (Table 1). Participants felt that there was no time for employers to train these skills on the job. This demonstrates it is crucial for students who are near graduation to polish these skills on course assignments or projects to practice the software outside of the classroom. Participants stated that shortening some portions of the academic programs would also be supportive to transition success because too much time in the program is spent on non-career related learning activities.

Participants also stated that communication is important with regard to public speaking or negotiating, which is deemed as exhibiting confidence and appearing knowledgeable. Knowing how to communicate well was also thought of as a contributor to career progression.

Recent graduates who were interviewed also mentioned that knowing how to progress in one's career was a crucial factor in moving up in the workplace. It was suggested that volunteering on projects and being more visible would help management notice the graduate's talent. Moreover, effective interviewing was noted as a skill that graduates needed to practice to transition into the workplace.

Table 1: Skills Needed For The Workplace

n = 16, Sigma = 23		
Skills Needed	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage of Participants**
Computer Software (Net)	*15*	*93.75%*
Excel	5	31.25
Database	4	25
PhotoShop	2	12.5
InDesign	2	12.5
HTML	2	12.5
Communication (Net)	*4*	*25%*
Public Speaking	2	12.5
Negotiations	2	12.5
Career Related (Net)	*4*	*25%*
Career Progression	2	12.5
Interviewing	2	12.5

Teaching Technical Skills Needed From The Recent Graduates' Perspective

Recent graduates stated that postsecondary institutions could be a driver in learning the technical skills that were noted in Table 1. As shown in Table 2, most of the participants (31.25%) mentioned that computer labs with the software could be used to develop knowledge and comfort in using various types of software. Projects and simulations could be designed integrating real world learning activities for many of the skills needed in the workplace. These learning activities will create authentic assessment in which students can be encouraged to demonstrate knowledge and understanding.

Participants also suggested that colleges could collaborate to develop internships to assist with student production of projects and simulations, as noted in Table 2. Moreover, students could further determine what employers expect of employees, as well as what potential employees can expect from future employers. These collaborative learning experiences could help provide exposure and opportunities for either gaining employment or receiving a letter of recommendations from the collaborative partners.

Table 2: Teaching Technical Skills

n = 16		
Teaching Skills	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage of Participants**
Computer labs	5	31.25%
Projects	4	25%
Simulations	4	25%
Find internships for students	3	18.75%

Learning Environments From The Recent Graduates' Perspective

Participants had various suggestions for the types of learning environments that could assist in learning the skills required in the workplace. In addition to real world application, such as internships, participants thought that socializing and networking events (25%) could help provide introductions to individuals for career information and advice (Table 3). Bringing in guest speakers (18.75%) was another suggestion to offer students "hungry for information" additional perspectives from outside the institution as an opportunity to receive possible advice.

Recent graduates also preferred workshops, projects, and team assignments to help simulate a day on the job. Simulations could also allow students exposure to software and practice on communication skills through interaction with employees in the same career field. Through these experiential learning activities, students can learn how to problem solve, process decisions, and develop habits of mind necessary for effective critical thinking.

Table 3: Learning Environments

n = 16, Sigma = 18		
Learning Environments	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage of Participants**
Real world application	5	31.25%
Socializing and networking	4	25%
Workshops/projects	4	25%
Bring in guest speakers	3	18.75%
Group work	2	12.5%

Activities To Prepare Students From The Recent Graduates' Perspective

Learning activities relating to career progression (31.25%) was the main learning activity mentioned to prepare students for the workplace (Table 4). Recent graduates stated that internships and career tracks would be a helpful to a successful transition into the workforce. Mentorships (31.25%) were also equally preferred to help students become successful through working with other successful graduates or employees. One of the participants stated, "Successful people want to be around other successful people. We want to learn their 'tricks of the trade'."

Opportunities for presentations were also suggested as a venue for students to practice public speaking and enhance communication skills. Presentations could also encourage students to practice and apply software skills by including graphics or animation. Offering workshops for students to attend would also be an experiential learning environment outside of the formal classroom.

Table 4: Activities To Prepare Students

n = 16		
Activities to Prepare	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage of Participants**
Career Related (net)	*5*	*31.25%*
Internship	3	18.75
Career Tracking	2	12.5
Mentoring	5	31.25%
Presentations for students to give	3	18.75%
Workshops for students to attend	3	18.75%

As shown in Table 5, participants offered feedback as to how businesses and schools can build partnerships in order to help students understand the transition to the workplace. Twelve participants (75%) indicated a preference to experience career related activities such as internships, career tracking, and job shadowing. Six managers (37.5%) indicated that employees participated in company career days and career fairs. The other 25% of recent graduates also thought mentoring was essential to understand how to move forward and seek guidance.

Table 5: Business/School Partnerships

n = 16		
Business/School Partnerships	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage of Participants**
Career Related (Net)	*12*	*75%*
Internship	6	37.5
Career tracking/planning	4	25
Job shadowing	2	12.5
Mentoring	4	25%

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DISCUSSION

Skills Required

All of the respondents, both manager and recent graduates, felt that employees should have computer skills, such as knowledge of Microsoft Office, coding in HTML, and typing abilities when entering the workplace. Graphic design, social media use, and marketing were other major desired skill sets. While recent graduates felt that there was no time for employers to train these skills on the job, course assignments that integrate the software would provide practical experience. Managers also suggested that students require hands-on experience. Course activities, such as these, will bridge the requirement of hands-on activities requested in the manager's response to employee needs.

Instructional Strategies

Instructors design instructional frameworks for thorough professional conversations with each other (Danielson, 2009). These professional conversations may include community partners to teach basic computer programming and can give students opportunities to design personal websites. Instructor feedback should support the students' learning process and provide opportunities for growth through error correction. Problem-solving learning activities allow students to develop self-management and systemic habits of mind that lead to success.

Instructors can also offer experiential learning opportunities by providing tutorials and designing learning activities for computer labs. Students can lecture on course topics as the instructor facilitates the process. Helping students become more involved in the learning experience, as an alternative to writing about the theoretical aspects of content may allow time for experiential learning opportunities.

Other instructional strategies would include allowing students to obtain experience through computer classes with an emphasis on learning software and solving hardware problems. Otherwise students can become apprehensive working adults. Providing opportunities for students to volunteer is another way to learn about career progression.

Learning Environments

Recent graduates and managers indicated that a simulated *learning* environment would include one where schools implement an environment that includes learning by doing and experimenting. Simulations should encourage working with software and teamwork to develop communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. The lab environment was preferred with computers and other hardware and software technology. Instructors can design and provide learners with case scenarios and students can then simulate an actual report. This type of hands-on learning environment can provide basic experience for transition into the workforce.

The learning environments should foster listening, speaking, writing, presentations, and participation to help develop effective communicators. Instructors should foster a relaxed environment where students are encouraged to speak, participate, and develop by correcting mistakes. Powerful learning environment are student-centered (Konigs, Brand-Gruwel, and vanMerrienboer, 2005). Instructors should provide constructive feedback on student assignments that align with employers' expectations in the workplace.

Students should view the entire learning process as an opportunity to learn, practice and improve as a future or advanced employee (Oultram, 2012). The instructor feedback may include a more efficient technique or process suitable for the learning situation. Students can also gain practical experience through critical thinking learning environments. When instructors foster an inquiry-based learning environment, students develop questioning skills. Participants had multiple suggestions for the types of learning environments that result in developing and transferring skills to the workplace.

Bringing Business To School

Instructors can implement simulated activities in the classroom. A simulation of a work environment will provide students an idea of the expectations, processes, and procedures in the workplace. Communication and implementation of ideas are key components in the workplace that students should be prepared to engage.

According to Oultram (2012), instructors are able to create a workplace experience for pre-working adults. It is essential that students learn to work with others. By working in groups and teams within the college learning environment, students will gain a better understanding of how to collaborate and communicate effectively in the workplace. A suggested learning activity could consist of a board room simulation whereas students pitch ideas and create presentations.

Immersion into the business world would be helpful to students in determining prospects and opportunities. Educators can bring in experts or guest speakers from businesses to discuss personal experiences and provide outside perspectives. Instructors can also share personal and professional experience to give students possible insight into a particular career industry.

Meeting and maintaining company professionalism is key to a successful transition and promotion within the workplace. Students should adhere to company policy and dress professional during course workplace simulations. The company's representative can collaborate with the instructor to provide feedback on student performance. There are several opportunities to practice professionalism that provide real-life experiences of company expectations.

CONCLUSION

The way that students learn and teachers teach continues to evolve. Bloom (2010) proposes that the responsibility for student readiness for the workforce is for all education professionals throughout the students' education. Students are weighing education options that will result in the best investment for future employment. Companies want students to have particular skills when entering the workforce. States and agencies are moving to meet the needs of students and employers through workforce readiness programs (Castro, Bragg, Khan, Barber & Common, 2010).

College and community business collaboration can bridge the college and career transition. Aligning the needs of the economic workforce and students' college learning experiences through collaborative projects will support the needs of graduates entering the workforce and company managers. Establishing learning experiences that provide practical career experience while in college will support student readiness for the workforce.

This continuous study of employers' and graduates' perspectives of workforce readiness is critical to combining resources to support economic development. This research contributes to the collected works of identifying how educators and businesses can proactively collaborate to merge the desired and needed skills to be successful in the workplace.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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