

**Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences Student Perceptions of Career Preparedness**

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## Introduction

It is well documented faculty and employers have preferences on skills necessary for college graduates to be successful in the workplace, but inquiries with students' perspectives are limited (Brosnan, 2019; Cox et al., 2010; Irlbeck & Akers, 2009, Kurtzo et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2007). "While research on employer and teacher perceptions of college and career readiness skills exists, a limited amount of literature has been published regarding the topic from the postsecondary students' perspective" (DiBenedetto & Willis, 2020, p. 46). The AAAE National Research Agenda includes a research priority of "meaningful, engaged learning in all environments" which fits this study.

## Conceptual Framework

DiBenedetto and Willis (2020) defined nine career readiness skill clusters: life skills, career skills, social skills, interdisciplinary topics, knowledge competencies, incidental learning skills, dispositions and experiences. Robinson et al. (2007) surveyed recent graduates' supervisors to see how they prioritized employability skills. Problem solving and analytic were the most sought-after skills for these employers, while written communication was ranked the lowest. "Seven of the employability skill constructs had a mean weighted discrepancy score greater than .60, including problem solving and analytic (MWDS = 1.08), risk taking (MWDS = .82), motivation (MWDS = .76), managing conflict (MWDS = .68), decision making (MWDS = .67), lifelong learning (MWDS = .62) and listening (MWDS = .62)" (Robinson et al., 2007, p. 22). The four lowest rated were supervision, coordination, ability to conceptualize, and written communication (Robinson et al., 2007). The National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) uses eight competencies to discuss career readiness: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021).

## Methodology

A quantitative survey instrument was developed based on Robinson et al.'s (2007) study and administered using Qualtrics. Nonprobability voluntary sampling was used for undergraduate students in Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas (N=1,853). In the spring of 2022, students were recruited using emails and reminders sent out by departmental staff members. An initial email and three follow-up emails were utilized. The researcher had no way of tracking how many students received the emails, but 188 completed the questionnaire. This paper reports two of the larger study objectives by describing the Bumpers College undergraduate students (1) perceived levels of skill importance to their future careers and (2) perceived levels of competence at performing employability skills. Pilot testing data was collected and a Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the student questionnaire was 0.940, which is an excellent score for internal reliability.

## Results/ Findings

Students rated 28 skills on importance to their future careers. The four-point scale ranged from no importance to major importance. Six skills had mean scores of 2.75 or higher. Solving problems ( $M = 2.87$ ;  $SD = .36$ ), identifying problems ( $M = 2.82$ ;  $SD = .40$ ), meeting deadlines ( $M = 2.77$ ;  $SD = .51$ ), listening attentively ( $M = 2.76$ ;  $SD = .51$ ), working well with fellow employees ( $M = 2.75$ ;  $SD = .51$ ), and adapting to situations of change ( $M = 2.75$ ;  $SD = .50$ ) were in this category. The five lowest rated skills scored 2.39 or lower. These skills consisted of

contributing to group problem solving ( $M = 2.39$ ;  $SD = .70$ ), assigning/delegating responsibility ( $M = 2.37$ ;  $SD = .76$ ), identifying sources of conflict among people ( $M = 2.28$ ;  $SD = .76$ ), taking reasonable job-related risks ( $M = 2.23$ ;  $SD = .70$ ), and supervising the work of others ( $M = 2.18$ ;  $SD = .76$ ). The other 17 skill mean scores ranged from 2.73 to 2.46.

Students also rated their competence at performing the same 28 employability skills. The four-point scale ranged from no competence to major competence. The six highest skills had mean scores of 2.54 or higher. Working well with fellow employees ( $M = 2.65$ ;  $SD = .55$ ), meeting deadlines ( $M = 2.61$ ;  $SD = .59$ ), ability to work independently ( $M = 2.61$ ;  $SD = .62$ ), empathizing with others ( $M = 2.55$ ;  $SD = .61$ ), understanding the needs of others ( $M = 2.55$ ;  $SD = .61$ ), and listening attentively ( $M = 2.54$ ;  $SD = .62$ ). The lowest ranked five skills had mean scores of 2.20 or lower. These were assigning/delegating responsibilities ( $M = 2.18$ ;  $SD = .72$ ), identifying sources of conflict among people ( $M = 2.18$ ;  $SD = .66$ ), initiating change to enhance productivity ( $M = 2.12$ ;  $SD = .76$ ), supervising the work of others ( $M = 2.05$ ;  $SD = .74$ ), taking reasonable job-related risks ( $M = 1.94$ ;  $SD = .75$ ).

### Conclusions

Student respondents reflected the results of Robinson et al. (2007). That study's results highly ranked solving problems (#1), listening attentively (#5), identifying 51 problems (#6), and working well with fellow employees (#7). This mirrored some of the findings in the DiBenedetto & Willis study (2020). They found solving problems, time management, and teamwork ranked highly among their respondents. Furthermore, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2021) recommended active listening, demonstrating dependability, adapting, and collaborating with others as needed for career readiness.

Student respondents ranked their competence at performing certain employability skills as high including, working well with fellow employees, meeting deadlines, ability to work independently, empathizing with others, understanding the needs of others, and listening attentively. Most of these were ranked very high in the Robinson et al. (2007) study, with ability to work independently (#1), working well with fellow employees (#3), listening attentively (#4), and meeting deadlines (#8). Respondents had high overlap between the skills rated least useful and low in competence. Four of the five lowest skills included assigning and delegating responsibilities, identifying sources of conflict among people, taking reasonable job-related risks, and supervising the work of others.

### Implications/ Recommendations

Students reported competence for only three of the six skills they reported as necessary for career success. Thus, faculty and advisors should assess this for students in their career tracks and encourage learning opportunities where students can learn and apply these skills. Moreover, utilizing assessments to evaluate students' actual competence instead of their perceived competence would be useful. Due to the overlap of skills rated least useful and those in which students had the least competence, the aforementioned use of skill assessments could provide insight on if the perception of usefulness was connected to pre-existing perceptions of low competence. Expanding the sample size and comparing those results to industry studies of needed skills could inform curriculum development and meet student and industry needs for career preparation.

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