

Closing the Soft Skills Gap: A Case in Leveraging Technology and the “Flipped” Classroom with a Programmatic Approach to Soft Skill Development in Business Education

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Abstract

There is a clear “gap” between skills graduates acquire in college and skills needed to succeed in today’s competitive, dynamic workforce. This article outlines benefits and challenges of integrating “soft” skills into business curriculum to fill this “gap” through a two-pronged strategy: adopting a programmatic approach to “soft” skill development and redesigning courses by leveraging technology and the “flipped” classroom. Insights are provided from implementation in a large research institution’s undergraduate business program and, specifically, in the design of its project management course. Results are shared regarding students’ performance (assessed through computer-based simulations), perceptions, and endorsements of leadership and team building competencies at the course-level and job placement data are shared for the program in comparison to other majors in the college-level, which indicate the recommended pedagogical strategies and technology integration yield favorable outcomes. This study provides unique insights for other institutions, programs, and educators implementing competency-based “soft” skill initiatives. Implications for future initiatives and research are discussed.

Keywords

flipped classroom; active learning; educational technology; computer simulations; leadership; teamwork

Introduction

Many employers and researchers agree that “soft” skills such as communication, complex problem solving, leadership, and teamwork are in popular demand in the workforce, but there is a gap between skills needed and skills learned, demonstrating the need for intentionally teaching these

skills from both a program curriculum perspective as well as a course design perspective (Ritter et al., 2018). This “skills gap” may be addressed through education and training. Although many educators have recognized this need, numerous challenges exist to incorporating “soft” skills into courses, which are heavy with technical knowledge (“hard” skills). Despite educators’ efforts to integrate “soft” skills at a course-level, consistency is often lacking at a program- or college-wide level.

This article provides an example of one academic program-wide initiative that has successfully fostered its students’ “soft” skills development through thoughtful curriculum and course design. The decision to implement this initiative for each required course in the department was made after conducting research on the skills required by local companies that hire graduates from this institution as well as based on advisement from the advisory board which consists of business leaders from real estate, consulting, agriculture, manufacturing and production, and sales fields. We set forth an example of, and model for, designing courses by leveraging technology and the “flipped” active learning approach for content delivery and assessment.

The flipped classroom approach provides students with learning resources to review prior to class meetings. Then, when attending class, students work as individuals and in groups to apply what they have learned through intentional, guided active-learning activities. Galindo-Dominguez (2021) discusses the many benefits of incorporating a flipped classroom approach for students learning both hard and soft skills. Results of the study, including students’ perceptions about the example course’s computer-based simulation, value of certain “soft” skills, and mechanisms for sharing competencies with potential employers are explored. Although this article is framed within the context of one case study in a university’s business curriculum, this conversation is relevant to all educators preparing students to succeed in a competitive job market and technologically advancing workplace. It is crucial for educators to continue sharing innovative approaches and lessons learned and this article contributes to a particularly timely discussion given the increased need of these skills following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Need for Soft Skills in the Workplace and in the Classroom

Wagner (2008) conducted interviews with hundreds of managers and leaders of businesses, non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and philanthropic organizations. Based on these interviews, Wagner developed seven “survival skills” that students need to cultivate to be successful in business environments. These skills include collaboration and leadership, critical thinking and problem solving, imagination and curiosity, oral and written communication, adaptability, initiative, and accessing and analyzing information. When comparing Wagner’s survival skills to the soft skills identified by the integrated business department at the university while conducting focus groups with local companies that often hire graduates and with the advisory board, there is still an incredible amount of overlap between the skills that Wagner identified in 2008 to the current soft skills that are incorporated into the integrated business department’s classes including teamwork, creativity and innovation, oral and written communication, professionalism, qualitative and quantitative problem solving, and leadership.

In technologically-advancing environments, continuing to propel in the automation of complex technical tasks, in a job market full of potential candidates who possess technical knowledge, employees across numerous industries and disciplines are expected to possess discipline-specific

acumen and skills as well as a variety of valuable interpersonal or “soft” skills, such as communication, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork (Ritter et al., 2018). Skills including creativity, persuasion, and collaboration are among the highest in demand from companies today (Shappley, 2019). According to LinkedIn’s Global Talent Trends report, “92% of talent professionals and hiring managers say that soft skills are just as important – or more important – than hard skills” (Shappley, 2019). Possessing technical knowledge, alone, is insufficient to succeed in today’s dynamic, highly competitive job market (Gillies, 2019).

Ferreira and colleagues (2022) conducted research on both hard and soft skill gaps that have become more prevalent in business environments since the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work showed that skill levels in the areas of communication etiquette, teamwork, client communication, negotiation skills, and public speaking all declined from pre-pandemic levels. This demonstrates a renewed need for intentionally preparing graduates to have these skills as they enter the workforce.

Challenges to Incorporating Competency-Based Content and Assessment

Efforts to integrate soft skills are time-consuming and extend beyond the subject matter expertise of faculty. Furthermore, modality of instruction, such as online (virtual), face-to-face (in-person), or hybrid (online and face-to-face combined) delivery modes, may present unique challenges for educators attempting to convey these skills to students. Therefore, developing effective training and education for soft skills requires integrating additional tools and technologies combined with intentional course design. For example, integrating a problem-based learning model into a hybrid course could facilitate development of collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and negotiation skills (Romero et al., 2014).

The Need for Faculty Support, Development, and Administrative Leadership

The development of courses with both hard and soft skills requires thoughtful course and assessment design, which are skills not necessarily prevalent for subject matter experts teaching in their disciplines (Tang, 2019). According to Tang (2019), “Scholars need to engage and develop those soft skills through learning processes or training over a time span in higher education institutions” (p. 8). Therefore, many universities recognize the need to support faculty in their course redesign efforts and implementation of new technologies.

To foster pedagogical innovation and collaboration, many institutions have increased accessibility of support resources through centers for teaching and learning excellence and institutional effectiveness, which are “influenced by but not dependent on flashy digital technology” and focused on continuous improvement (Lieberman, 2018). The results of such collaborations are carefully crafted courses to meet learners’ needs but still focus on attainment of discipline-specific knowledge rather than skills that transfer across disciplines and potential careers.

In addition to propelling faculty to overcome any challenges in course design and assessment, it is crucial for administrators to recognize the need to support and train faculty to impart these “soft” skills to their students. Faculty are typically hired for being experts in their field and are expected to teach the hard skills in their area of expertise, imparting discipline-specific knowledge to their students. For example, a strategic management professor who is an expert in business strategy

would be expected to teach her students about Porter's five forces. However, this expert may or may not be able to teach her students how to be a valuable and productive team member or leader. Teaching skills such as leadership and teamwork are different than teaching strategic business analysis models. Consequently, those that hire and train faculty must recognize the difference between teaching "hard" and "soft" skills to ensure faculty are prepared to teach, and assess, both.

"Soft" Skills, Curriculum Design, and Technology

Recently, there has been a great deal of research regarding the "flipped" classroom and educational technology (Lo, 2018). The technology-based learning model (Hsu et al., 2012) emphasizes the importance of clear learning objectives, learning strategies, and adopted classroom technologies among other key factors for "flipped" classrooms (Lin & Hwang, 2019). Various forms of interactive technology, such as online instructional videos/lectures, discussion forums, and quizzes, and interactive technologies including polling, games, and simulations, have been incorporated into "flipped" classroom designs (Lo, 2018). This enables students to spend class time on higher-level learning activities outlined in Bloom's revised taxonomy, such as to apply, analyze, evaluate, and create because pre-class activities such as video lectures and quizzes provide opportunities for lower-level learning mastery such as remembering or understanding (Gilboy, Heinerichs, & Pazzaglia, 2015; Lo, 2018). Adopting a "flipped" classroom approach has been evidenced to promote "soft" skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, and other interpersonal skills because discipline-specific learning ("hard" skills) occurs through self-directed activities outside the classroom (pre-class and post-class activities), leaving class sessions open for active-learning opportunities that cultivate "soft" skills (Baytiyeh, 2017; Ferreri & O'Connor, 2013; Marks et al., 2014).

Although students and faculty have reported increased opportunities for "soft" skill development in "flipped" classes, few studies present empirically strong cases for evaluating improved higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). This gap in the literature may be due to the focus on discipline-specific learning outcomes or the challenges surrounding evaluation of "soft" skills, but it has been cited as an opportunity for additional research on the efficacy of "flipped" classrooms for "soft" skill development. This article provides an example of a small case study examining the viability of utilizing technology to aid in the development and assessment of "soft" skills in an undergraduate "flipped" project management course within the business college at a large research university.

Integrated Business at University of Central Florida

Despite potential barriers to successfully implementing a "flipped" classroom, integrated with technology, there are departments leading this mindset shift from traditional to innovative teaching practices, with the intention of fostering development of "total package" graduate students, within the college of business at the University of Central Florida. The integrated business department was born with the specific intention of equipping students with "soft" skills to truly differentiate them from other business graduates. The program's immersive culture and coursework are focused upon attainment of the aforementioned "soft" skills in conjunction with functional business knowledge such as management, marketing, accounting, finance, business technology, strategy, human resources, and project management (University of Central Florida, n.d.a.). The emphasis upon "soft" skills were not an afterthought; they were selected with employers' needs in mind and

were at the forefront of the program's curriculum, course, and assessment development. Thoughtful course design plays a large role in maximizing learning and "soft" skill development.

Thus far, integrated business graduates have been quite successful in landing positions across a wide variety of industries, functional business departments, and roles, including with Fortune 500 companies. Examples of alumni careers include *Solutions Analyst* at Deloitte Consulting, *Area Manager* at Amazon, *Business Development Representative* at Adobe, *Executive Team Lead of Logistics* at Target, and *Senior Purchasing Analyst* at Publix. According to recent graduate surveys, integrated business students consistently report significantly higher employment rates compared to all majors. See Table 1.

Table 1

Job Placement Data for Integrated Business Majors Compared to All Majors

Academic Major	Students (Total)	Job Placement (Total)	Job Placement (% of Total)	Unknown or Still Seeking Employment (Total)	Unknown or Still Seeking Employment (% of Total)
All Majors, Spring 2019	780	544	69.74%	204	26.15%
Integrated Business Majors, Spring 2019	243	225	92.59%	12	4.94%
All Majors, Summer 2019	333	161	48.35%	151	45.35%
Integrated Business Majors, Summer 2019	123	70	56.91%	46	37.40%
All Majors, Spring 2020	754	410	54.38%	290	38.46%
Integrated Business Majors, Spring 2020	220	163	74.09%	40	18.18%
All Majors, Summer 2020	353	163	46.18%	157	44.48%
Integrated Business Majors, Summer 2020	148	108	72.97%	27	18.24%

*All Majors include Management, Marketing, Finance, Accounting, Economics, Real Estate, and Integrated Business. Students reporting military, business ownership, travel, and graduate-level education are not included above.

What is even more motivating to educators and administrators in our department who have worked diligently to teach “soft” skills, and students who have cultivated these skills, is that the department is developing a reputation within the community and with employers that graduates are adaptive to a multitude of business environments. Success realized through previous graduates’ employment is being recognized by employers and demand for integrated business graduates is quickly growing. Thankfully, so is the supply of students; integrated business is the fastest-growing major in the college and is becoming one of the highest-enrolled programs (number 3 of the top 15 majors by enrollment) in the entire university of over 69,000 students (University of Central Florida, n.d.b.).

Armed with the “soft” skills they need to succeed in the workplace, students achieve higher employability outcomes by confidently communicating their unique value proposition to potential employers. Carefully crafted resumes, cover letters, and professional social media pages exemplify their written communication skills while their ability to speak with ease during interviews demonstrates their oral communication skills. Graduates present themselves as potential leaders, team members, or independent achievers since they have developed skills to succeed in these roles in an active learning classroom environment. While communicating with potential employers, students cite experiences such as their leadership of a team project during their project management course, which entailed oversight of developing a project management plan.

Developing and Assessing Leadership and Teamwork in Project Management

The Course and Design

Projects are temporary endeavors, with a clear beginning and end, to create a unique set of deliverables or objectives; project management encompasses the application of tools, techniques, knowledge, and skills to achieve project objectives (Project Management Institute, 2017). Project management is increasingly being integrated into curriculum across many disciplines including information systems, science, and engineering through learning approaches such as simulation games and project-based learning, coupled with current discipline-specific content through creation of new courses or a single additional course (Garratt, 1995; Hadim & Esche, 2002; Linton, 2002; Reif & Mitri, 2005). Although quickly gaining in popularity, primarily to increase focus on the marriage of “soft” and technical skill development, project management has been identified as an important skill from the perspectives of alumni and employers, essential for business management graduates across industries (Holtzman & Kraft, 2010).

Due to the immense value effective project management skills can bring to organizations, the integrated business program developed a project management course to ensure its graduates are capable of providing this valuable skill set to employers. The course was developed to equip students with technical project management skills for agile and traditional approaches using the Project Management Institute’s framework. Additionally, the course was designed with the intentionality of fostering students’ “soft” skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication. “Flipped” class meetings consist of team/project-based active learning to develop or present project management plan components including charters, work breakdown structures, network diagrams, schedules, and budgets while utilizing software tools.

When developing the course, technology played a large role in its thoughtful design. First, self-directed learning occurs through pre-class activities via curated digital media learning materials including video lectures from sources like LinkedIn Learning and YouTube as well as online readings including an e-textbook and open-source articles. Following coverage of assigned learning materials, students complete online quizzes to assess lower-level learning and receive immediate feedback. Pre-class activities prepare students for in-class higher-level learning, applying concepts through creating project plans via team-based learning in an instructor-guided, learner-centered environment. Additional scenario-based computer-graded assessments are incorporated to evaluate students' higher-level learning of concepts including scheduling and earned value management. The course design mirrors Lo's (2018) recommendations for "flipped" classroom design and implementation, which are grounded in Spector's (2015) research on six foundational pillars of educational technology. See Table 2.

Table 2

Educational Technology Pillars, Flipped Classroom Recommendations, and Characteristics of the Flipped Project Management Course

Pillars of Educational Technology (Spector, 2015)	Flipped Classroom Recommendations (Lo, 2018)	Characteristics of the Project Management Course Flipped Course
Communication	Explain the rationale and expectations of the flipped approach to stakeholders such as students and parents; incorporate brief instructional videos	Value and requirements for flipped approach are clearly communicated; multimedia videos from LinkedIn Learning are utilized
Interaction	Develop interaction opportunities such as online discussions; create online quizzes based on videos that provide students computerized feedback	An online discussion is available for students; online quizzes on videos are taken before class meetings and quizzes provide students feedback
Environment	Support flipped classroom efforts with resources; implement a school-wide or faculty-wide flipped classroom approach	Organizational support and resources are available and utilized; a department-wide, college-supported flipped classroom approach is utilized for all courses in the program
Culture	Adopt a learner-centered classroom culture of instruction	Learner-centered activities are at the core of instructional culture in the classroom—teachers are not the “center” of instruction
Instruction	Design flipped classrooms based upon established models	Instructional content is sequenced so that lower-level learning occurs first outside of class and higher-level master occurs during, and sometimes following, class
Learning	Instructors guide students with optimally challenging learning tasks; during class meetings, utilize peer-assisted learning approach	Faculty support students as coaches, consultants, and mentors as students complete challenging but achievable tasks; peer-assisted learning occurs during class meetings via team-based assignments

Based upon the nature of the course's team-based learning activities, combined with students' prior knowledge of the concepts, leadership and teamwork are two "soft" skills that are cultivated in the project management course. This is consistent with Kim & Jang's (2017) research that a "flipped" classroom incorporating digital media and team-based learning offers students the opportunity to lead the class, resulting in increased teamwork skills and communication abilities. Leadership and team skills are critical "soft" skills, highly desirable to potential employers, particularly in project management (Gillard, 2009). Therefore, these skills were selected to assess as part of a course-level study for the college's competency-based education initiative.

Materials and Methods

Design

The method for this case study analysis is a convergent mixed methods approach. This pre-experimental design is a study of one group of participants (no control group was utilized) through measures collected following participation in a technology-infused "flipped" classroom. In the final few weeks of participating in the semester-long project management course (the "intervention," in this study), undergraduate students were provided the opportunity to participate in a competency-based education initiative. Participation was limited to the 144 students enrolled in the four course sections and was not randomized. The opportunity to participate was announced in class and online. Participation was optional, and willing participants were provided the opportunity to receive LinkedIn skills endorsements, a LinkedIn recommendation, and replacement of an individual assignment (that had already been completed) worth 5% of the overall course grade. To be eligible for participation incentives, students must have earned an 80% or better on at least one competency (or an average of 80% or better on both competencies) and completed the feedback survey.

For this case study, data were collected in two forms: a performance measurement on a "soft" skills computer-based assessment and cross-sectional survey results. The "soft" skills assessment was a measurement of individual students' performance scores on two computer-based simulations in Pearson's MyManagementLab (MyLab) platform. Following completion of one or both simulation assessments, students then completed an electronically administered survey, featuring both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey design offers insights through analysis of qualitative and quantitative data (survey) in conjunction with the quantitative performance scores from the "soft" skills assessment.

A control group was not included in the study design due to not wanting to withhold the opportunity for students to receive the anticipated positive benefits of participation, including insights into leadership and teamwork abilities and opportunities to be endorsed and recommended via social media platform. For educational research studies, it has been considered a potential ethical dilemma by some to withhold an intervention that researchers believe will have a positive impact upon participants in a control group (Cohen et al., 2007). Additionally, maintaining consistency of course assessments and learning opportunities across all project management course sections is a priority for the faculty and department. The study was reviewed and approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board.

Sample and Students

Participants in this study were undergraduate business majors enrolled in a required project management course for their major (either integrated business or management) in the Spring 2019 semester. All courses were taught by the same faculty member and the maximum class section size was 50 students. Of the 144 potential participants enrolled in the course, 28 students (19.4%) voluntarily participated in the study. A total of 21 participants completed both simulation assessments and 7 participants completed only one. All participants completed the survey questionnaire following simulation completion.

Instruments and Data Collection

The first two instruments utilized were computer-based simulations developed by subject matter experts in the field of business leadership and teamwork. The scenario-based simulations are branching scenarios developed to assess learning objectives for each of the two competencies by placing student participants in the role of business decision-makers. Participants accessed the simulations via the Pearson MyLab platform, which was provided to students for free. Performance measurements were automatically scored for the simulation assessments via MyLab. Each score was recorded for all participants and downloaded to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

Following participants' completion of one or both computer-based simulations, each participant completed the second instrument, a survey developed specifically for this study to gather feedback about their perceptions of their experiences in the competency-based education initiative. The survey included both open-ended and close-ended questions and was administered through the course's learning management system. The survey gauged students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the simulations in evaluating their "soft" skill competencies, the relevancy and value of the competencies for their overall career success and project management career success, the value of competencies for current and potential employers, and the value of incentives for participating in the study, which included LinkedIn skills endorsements, LinkedIn recommendations, and assignment substitution worth a maximum of 5% of the overall course grade.

Additionally, students provided insight into other "soft" skills they would be interested in demonstrating competencies for, such as communication and critical thinking, and other mechanisms for sharing results of competencies earned while incentivizing competency-based participation, such as recommendation letters or certificates. Finally, students shared their perceptions about ease of usability for the MyLab simulation platform, clarity of instructions and requirements for study participation, and likelihood to participate in future competency-based education programs if available. Survey results were exported from Canvas to a Microsoft Excel document and merged with the results from the MyLab simulation scores for analysis.

Results

Data collected with both instruments were analyzed in Microsoft Excel. All participants passed the threshold expectation of earning an 80% or better on one, or an average of two, computer simulation assessments. The descriptive statistics are provided for both leadership and teamwork assessments in Table 3. While the average score for 28 participants that completed the leadership

assessment was 90.18%, the average score was slightly higher, 91.36%, for the 21 participants that completed the teamwork assessment. For participants to meet participation expectations to receive incentives such as the LinkedIn recommendation, they were required to complete only one simulation. Out of the 7 participants who only completed one (and not both) assessment, 100% (7 students) chose to complete the leadership assessment, which could signify that students perceive this competency to have a higher value for potential employers, higher value for career success, or are even more confident in their leadership skills.

Discussion

When it came to students' perceptions of how accurately the computer-based simulation gauged their competencies, 92.31% agreed or strongly agreed with the accuracy of the simulation in gauging their leadership skills while 95.24% agreed or strongly agreed with the accuracy of the simulation gauging their teamwork skills. For perception of the value of each competency for the student's career success, the average that agreed or strongly agreed was 96.15% for leadership and 100% for teamwork. When asked how valuable each competency was for success as a project manager, students perceived leadership to be slightly more important (96.15%) than teamwork (95.24%). The largest difference between perceived value for the two competencies was when students were asked about value of competencies to current or potential employers. 100% of students agreed or disagreed that teamwork would be valued by their employer while 92.31% thought that leadership would be valued by their employer. This is an interesting difference as it is opposite of the preference noted through participation by students choosing to earn only one competency (leadership) when given the choice to complete only one of the two assessments. See Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3

Results of Competency Assessment

Computer-Simulations	<i>n</i>	Average Score for Sample
Leadership	28	90.18
Team Building	21	91.36
Average of Both Simulations	28	90.32

Table 4

Results of Perception Survey

Competency	Criteria	<i>n</i>	% Agree or Strongly Agree
Leadership	Simulation accurately gauged master of my competency	26	92.31

Leadership	Competency is relevant/applicable for my career success	26	96.15
Leadership	Competency is relevant/applicable for my success as a project manager	26	96.15
Leadership	Competency is valuable to my current or potential employer	26	92.31
Team Building	Simulation accurately gauged master of my competency	21	95.24
Team Building	Competency is relevant/applicable for my career success	21	100.00
Team Building	Competency is relevant/applicable for my success as a project manager	21	95.24
Team Building	Competency is valuable to my current or potential employer	21	100.00

To gauge students' perceptions of the values of each incentive for participating in the study, students were asked to rank each incentive from no value (=0) to high value (=3). After each value was coded for responses, the incentive with the highest perceived value was the LinkedIn Recommendation (2.68) followed by LinkedIn Skills Endorsements (2.64) and the assignment replacement option (2.57). When students were asked an open-ended question about how they would like future competencies to be conveyed once earned, 32.14% said they would like a recommendation letter in an alternative format while 21.43% said they would like to earn a certificate. While this question asked what mechanisms *other than* LinkedIn would be suitable for sharing competencies, 10.71% of students still said they think LinkedIn would be best and 17.86% of students said they were not sure of what sharing method would be ideal.

Students were asked an open-ended question about which competencies they would be most interested in earning in the future and the top response was communication (28.57%). The next highest response was critical thinking and problem-solving (17.86%) followed by decision making (10.71%). Other responses for competencies of interest included conflict resolution/management, interpersonal skills, ethics, project management, and time management. Additionally, almost all of the participants (96.43%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would participate in future competency-based education programs if they were available. Finally, 100% of participants indicated that the study requirements were clear and 96.43% agreed or strongly agreed that the MyLab platform was easy to use.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study as it was a pre-experimental design, which could also be referred to as a “one-shot case study” design and lacked a control group for comparison of between group measures and, additionally, lacked an opportunity for within group comparisons between measurements taken, for example, pre- and post-intervention (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, based upon the nature and purpose of the study, which was to examine viability of a larger-scale competency-base education program, there are still many valuable insights from the data analysis that has been conducted. The smaller sample size does limit generalizability of results to a larger population, however based on the results, the model used in this study can be used as a foundation for larger scale research to be conducted. Ideally, further research should be conducted to replicate this study at a larger scale to confirm viability of the program and provide additional student feedback before implementing a large-scale competency-based education program of this nature.

Conclusion

Additional research is merited in this area, but this study offers many valuable insights to educators interested in preparing students entering the competitive workplace by fostering their “soft” skill development, particularly through utilizing the “flipped” classroom and leveraging educational technology. Based upon the successful results of this small study, students successfully developed and demonstrated competencies of leadership and team building, indicating preferences for demonstrating additional competencies such as communication and critical thinking and receiving recommendations through LinkedIn or paper for completing competency-based assessments.

Although the experiences and examples throughout this article are framed within business disciplines, and as an alternative approach to traditional management education curriculum and lecture-based methods, initiatives to teach interpersonal skills should be both a goal and a challenge at the forefront of all educational institutions’ mission, across every academic discipline and knowledge area. Not only should “soft” skill development initiatives increase in prevalence throughout higher education, particularly at a programmatic level, but these efforts should also increase throughout workplace training programs as the efforts to develop skills such as social and emotional skills (such as leadership and initiative taking) and higher cognitive skills (such as creativity and complex problem-solving) will be integral in the workforce given the prevalence of artificial intelligence and task automation (Bughin, Lund, & Hazan, 2018). Although this article discusses the results of only one small case study implementing competency-based initiatives in an undergraduate project management business course, leveraging technology to aid in the development and assessment of “soft” skills is an endeavor that will be explored further in our own institution and is worthy of additional studies in other institutions as well. This article also shares our success in developing a programmatic, and innovative approach to cultivating a culture of “soft” skill development.

Challenges and areas of interest may vary based upon the stage of implementation for a “soft” skills development program or course. However, whether the plight is that of an educator struggling to teach teamwork skills in a high-enrolled managerial accounting course, a higher-level administrator lacking resources in developing a culture of innovative teaching practice and soft-skill focus for your institution, or a newly graduated student attempting to convey their conflict

resolution skills to a potential employer to land his or her dream job, our journeys all speak to the fact that educators and administrators alike must discuss ways to educate “soft skill superstars”, assess their interpersonal skills, and demonstrate these competencies to potential employers. Most simply put, “the integration of looking both inward and outward is the most powerful formula we know for creating long-term, high-impact organizational change” (Boaz & Fox, 2014).

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