

MAKING OUR GRADUATES COMPETITIVE IN THE WORKFORCE: WHAT SOFT SKILLS DO STUDENTS, FACULTY, ALUM AND EMPLOYERS VALUE?

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1 ABSTRACT

Facing the realities of increased education costs, competitive job markets and new demands of the 21st century, Universities are exploring how they can revitalize education and make their graduates more competitive in the workforce. Today's employers are looking for skills beyond discipline, knowledge and technical acumen. The study explores the ranking (using a force-rank response system) of soft skills (7 clusters with 7 characteristics each), such as communication, listening effectively, cross-disciplinary experiences, working well under pressure, ability to self-start and leadership. The soft skill priorities are compared to identify where students, faculty, alum and employers in Landscape Architecture and allied professions (n=1,036) agree or differ. The data is a subset of a larger study with over 8,000 respondents in Agriculture and Natural Resource disciplines from all 50 states and 31 Land-grant Universities. Mean scores are used to identify rankings of soft skills and ordinal regression to identify significant differences between the stakeholder groups. The employers rank order of soft skill priorities is: Communication, Self-management, Teamwork, Decision-making/Problem solving, Experiences, Professionalism, and Leadership. All of the stakeholder groups agree Communication is the most important soft skill with Employers value listening as the top Communication characteristic; above oral and written skills. Employers value Teamwork higher than students and faculty in importance for new employees. Discussion includes issues such as: students seem to under-estimate the importance of self-starting and that having a positive attitude is important to their future employers. Curricular implications are also discussed to enhance soft skill development.

1.1 Keywords

soft skills, employability, curriculum, communication