

Knowledge isn't Power...Soft Skills Are!



I'm a business school dean. Recently, I spoke with a business owner at one of our alumni events. He told me he was now hiring tradesmen based largely on attitude, not solely on skill set or experience level. He's looking for a teachable attitude and outgoing personality, which is important for his service personnel.

After hiring for attitude he trains those new employees in the skills they need. He's created his own "university"!

So, who's employable?

In this case a business owner is emphasizing soft skills for field personnel to sell products and services. For an applicant, discipline-based knowledge is good, but not a deal closer.

New hires, college grads and skilled trades, must bring to the table a critical set of soft skills.

My conversation with this business owner reinforced what I've read elsewhere that discipline-based knowledge paired with practical experience is important, but success also requires soft skills.

Among our business majors we're seeing this soft-skill expectation play out across the board, including in some of our most analytical majors, such as computer science and accounting.



What are soft skills?

Soft skills include capabilities like:

- Written and oral communication,
- Persuasiveness,
- Interacting effectively on a team,
- Being a self-starter,
- Having a good work ethic, and
- Critical thinking/problem-solving.

Even the *Wall Street Journal* is piling on, with article titles such as “Oh, My God, Where Is This Going? When Computer-Science Majors Take Improv” <https://www.wsj.com/articles/oh-my-god-where-is-this-going-when-computer-science-majors-take-improv-11557846729>.

We’re pushing the development of soft skills for our college grads. My N-of-1 sample from a business owner shows soft skills are equally as necessary in a skilled trade!

How are we developing student soft skills?

It’s all about mission - we’re a business school in a liberal arts university. We emphasize building soft skills as part of student professional development. Through these experiences our business majors improve their oral and written communication skills while developing self-confidence and poise.



Here are some ways we nudge our business majors toward soft skills:

- We work with our university career center on essentials such as resume editing and mock interviews.
- Majors have professional development embedded into the curriculum.
- Our advisory boards assist with career conversations and industry-specific insights.
- Donors fund student trips to conferences and trade shows where they successfully interview for jobs.
- To improve on-their-feet skills our undergrads compete in an industry-sponsored elevator pitch competition.
- Senior Marketing majors create and present a detailed marketing plan for an external client. Thus, critical thinking and analysis of a client’s needs are paired with making a compelling case for the plan.

Our liberal arts model also emphasizes student-faculty research. In Economics, for example, majors complete a two-course research sequence, then present the research project. Some of those projects are presented at academic conferences. This model pairs faculty-led research with soft skill development through oral and written presentations.



What's the payoff?

Combining discipline-specific knowledge, field experience, and soft skills produces marketable graduates. The old saying "Knowledge is Power" isn't adequate in our marketplace.

Do you need knowledge? Of course! Is knowledge alone enough? Of course not!

Graduates must be able to combine what they know with experienced-based insights. They must also have the soft skills necessary to effectively communicate those practical insights up the chain as well as horizontally to peers.

What do you think? What is your experience telling you?

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