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Soft Skills for Success: Preparing Graduates for Life-Long Achievement.

QEP Proposal

Soft Skills for Success: Preparing Graduates for Life-Long Achievement

David M. Brooking

Rationale/Introduction

For the vast majority of college students, making the determination to attend an institution of higher education centers on a desired economic outcome: a good job. In the Lumina Foundation report “Deciding to go to College” (2015), the top three reasons that students chose to attend college were connected to potential career opportunities, with 91% saying they wanted to attend an institution of higher education in order to improve employment opportunities, 90% to make more money and 89% to get a good job. Additionally, 58% indicated they wanted to attend college in order to switch jobs or change careers.

According to data collected through MUW’s Graduation Survey, a much lower percentage of the institution’s recent graduates are achieving this goal. Over the past three years, MUW graduates have reported the following:

- Between 16.26% and 18.91% are already employed in their field of study
- Between 24.86% and 29.57% have secured employment in their field of study
- Between 17.77% and 22.37% are searching for employment in their field of study (*MUW Graduation Surveys 2018-19, 2019-20 & 2020-21*)

It should be noted that the combined percentage of graduates who reported that they have either secured employment or are currently working in their chosen field of study closely resembles the percentage of graduates with career-focused bachelor’s degrees such as Nursing, Education, Culinary Arts, etc. This leaves the balance of graduates (well over half) reporting to be either searching for full-time employment in their field of study or employed on a full-time or part-time basis outside of their chosen field. MUW does not currently track employment of graduates beyond the program or college level.

Likewise, the availability of, and student engagement in, quality internships and other career-focused experiential learning opportunities are not compiled at the institutional level. However, these experiences have been deemed a high impact educational practice that can improve student learning and success (Kuh, 2008). Additionally, they have been shown to have positive effects in relation to student employment (Knouse et al. 1999) academic achievement (Binder et al, 2015) and are generally viewed as excellent opportunities for building career-specific knowledge and preparation.

In addition to internships and other career-focused experiential learning opportunities, universities can aid students in developing a number of skills that will provide an advantage in both securing and maintaining employment. For example, in the “State of

American Jobs” report by the Pew Research Center (2016), it was conveyed that of those currently in the American workforce:

99% stated that good written and spoken communications skills are extremely or very important in their job.

90% stated that interpersonal skills such as patience, compassion and getting along with people are extremely or very important in their job.

86% stated that critical thinking skills are extremely or very important in their job.

85% stated that being able to work with people from many different backgrounds is extremely or very important to be successful in the workforce.

The incorporation of these ‘soft skills’ throughout the university’s curricular and co-curricular programs has the potential to positively impact the academic and economic achievement of our graduates, preparing them for success in the classroom, in the workplace and in their communities.

QEP Topic

Mississippi University for Women’s recently adopted strategic priorities include several goals that lend support to an institutional effort towards preparing our students for successful careers:

- Academic Excellence Goal 2: Prepare students to be life-long learners and contributing members of today’s global economy
- Advancement Excellence Goal 5: Enhance services to shape career-ready graduates
- Community Connections Goal 3: Forge meaningful and engaged partnerships that provide real-life experiences for students
- Degree Completion Goal 4: Support students through degree completion and into their careers
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Goal 4: Capture, promote and enhance overall curriculum and programming that enhances multicultural awareness and understanding

These goals from the University’s strategic priorities are integral to the Soft Skills for Success Quality Enhancement Plan. This plan will focus on enhancing student learning and student success by incorporating a university-wide effort to monitor and improve student interpersonal, critical thinking, written & spoken communication skills and intercultural competence as well as providing a comprehensive array of experiential learning opportunities to prepare students for success in their chosen careers or further educational pursuits. This supports the University’s stated mission to “enhance student development and achievement as a platform for lifelong education and growth.” The implementation of the plan will involve four major components: (1) Incorporation of soft skills pedagogy into academic coursework across the university, (2) Co-curricular programming to promote and reinforce interpersonal skills and intercultural competence,

(3) Comprehensive monitoring and promotion of career-focused experiential learning opportunities for students, along with monitoring of university graduate career placement and/or enrollment in graduate school, and (4) creation of web-based student career portfolios.

Incorporation of soft skills pedagogy

The assessment plans of many academic programs across the institution already measure oral & written communication and critical thinking skills using the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics. Given that many academic programs have incorporated these soft skills into their teaching for several years, now is an excellent time to support faculty in evaluating the current strategies being used in courses to identify new approaches they may yield better results. Review and support of soft skills pedagogical techniques will be provided by the Kossen Center for Teaching and Learning and will include individual faculty consultations and workshops.

Co-curricular programming

Both academic and non-academic units (Student Life, Housing & Residence Life, the Student Success Center, Campus Recreation, etc.) across campus will be encouraged to sponsor programming to promote and reinforce knowledge and behaviors associated with interpersonal competence in the Personal-Interpersonal Competence Assessment (Seal et al, 2015), intercultural competence and career-readiness. Trainings will be offered on best practices in developing interpersonal competence in college students for faculty and staff, led by key personnel from across the institution. Trainings on intercultural competence will be organized, promoted and led by the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Council. Career-readiness programming (interview skills, resume and cover letter writing, the job search process) will be sponsored or co-sponsored by Career Services. Assessments of student participants on interpersonal and intercultural competence will be collected at all programs conducted in association with the QEP.

Career-focused experiential learning & career/graduate school placement

The Office of Career Services, in conjunction with academic departments, will maintain an active database of all career-focused experiential learning opportunities (CFELOs) being offered at the university. This would include internships, preceptorships, clinical experiences, student teaching and any other career-related placements. One faculty member in each college/school will serve as a career coordinator and aid in the identification of CFELOs and coordinate discipline-specific career preparation. Additionally, Career Services will track student participation in CFELOs by academic program, career category, length of experience and if compensation was included. The database will also track university graduate career placement and of enrollment in graduate school within six months of undergraduate degree completion.

Student Portfolios

Students will be encouraged to use web-based career portfolios that can maintain and catalog the competencies developed while enrolled at MUW along with their participation in CFELOs. Students will be introduced to the portfolios at new student orientation, as part of the Introduction to College Life (UN 101) course and other discipline-specific introductory courses, as well as through academic advising. Introducing students to the portfolios at multiple points will ensure that both freshmen and transfer students are equally engaged. The academic and non-academic units that sponsor cocurricular programming will also facilitate the use of the portfolios at their events. Additionally, the Office of Career Services webpage will host the portfolio system.

Proposed Timeline

Phase One: Years 1-2

1. Student Portfolios – The portfolio system will be selected, purchased and implemented. Training for faculty and staff on the system will be provided in order to ensure the correct usage of the system by students. Deployment of portfolio system in Year 2.
2. Campus climate survey – The Intercultural Development Inventory (idiinventory.com) will be conducted as an institution-wide assessment to serve both as a climate survey and to collect baseline data on student intercultural competence to inform future programming.
3. Career Coordinators – Faculty from each college/school will be selected and trained. This is expected to be a multi-year commitment in order to develop depth of knowledge.
4. Review of Soft Skills Pedagogy – The Kossen Center for Teaching and Learning will support the ongoing review of soft skills pedagogical techniques assessed through the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics on written and oral communication, critical thinking and intercultural knowledge & competence. Faculty participating in the review and improvement of these pedagogies may apply for funds to support their activities.
5. Interpersonal and Intercultural Competence training – Professional development will be offered to faculty and staff on how to develop interpersonal and intercultural competence among students. This will follow a train the trainer model, with expectations that those involved will create and implement curricular and co-curricular programming aimed at developing associated skills in students.
6. Career and Educational Placement data – The collection of data on career and graduate school placement will begin. This will involve both the Office of Career Services and the faculty career coordinators.

Phase Two: Years 3-5

In addition to continuing the work initiated in the QEP's first phase, the following activities will be implemented:

1. Student Intercultural Competence - the IDI will be given to students on an annual basis to determine the effectiveness of institution-wide intercultural competence programming (both curricular and co-curricular).
2. Interpersonal Competence - The PICA will be used to aid in the development of students' interpersonal competence provided through focused curricular and co-curricular programming. This is an outgrowth of the training provided to faculty and staff in Phase One.
3. CFELOs – The Office of Career Services, in conjunction with the faculty career coordinators, will create and maintain an up-to-date listing of career-focused experiential learning opportunities available through the institution as well as track the number of students by academic program, career category, length of experience and if compensation was included. This will be used to determine areas in need of additional support as well as identify strong career-focused programs.
4. Career Placement Data – The QEP will begin publishing career and graduate-school placement data. It is an expectation of this proposal that the information provided will eventually be used as a resource for student recruitment.

Student Learning Outcomes/Student Success Outcomes

Goal: To produce graduates who are prepared to compete in the global economy

Students will demonstrate effective critical thinking, oral and written communication skills appropriate to their discipline.

Students will develop interpersonal skills applicable to achieving success in meeting their career and/or educational goals.

Students will demonstrate skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultures (intercultural competence).

An increased percentage of graduates will report that they have either secured employment or are currently employed in their field of study (Baseline=48.5%).

Assessment

This QEP be assessed using a number of direct and indirect methods, to include the following:

1. Academic program assessments using the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics for Critical Thinking, Oral Communication, Written Communication and Intercultural Knowledge & Competence (direct).
2. Use of the Personal-Interpersonal Competence Assessment as part of curricular and cocurricular programming (indirect).
3. Track faculty participation in individual consultations and workshops provided by the Kossen Center for Teaching and Learning on soft skills pedagogy (indirect).
4. Track faculty and staff participation in trainings/workshops on developing interpersonal and intercultural competence in students (indirect).
5. Track student participation in career-readiness programming to gauge student engagement (indirect).
6. Track student participation in programming and events sponsored by the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council (indirect).
7. Use of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to collect baseline data and monitor ongoing development of intercultural competence among faculty, staff and students (indirect).
8. Review the quality of student career portfolios (direct).
9. Track student participation in career-focused experiential learning opportunities by academic program, career category, length of experience and if compensation was included to determine student interest and areas in need of further development (indirect).
10. Collect data on university graduate career placement and/or enrollment in graduate school within six months of undergraduate degree completion to determine effectiveness of the QEP (indirect).
11. Using the MUW Graduation Survey, monitor the percentage of graduates who report that they have either secured employment or are currently employed in their field of study (indirect).

Budget

The budgetary resources required for this QEP will involve the costs of assessment tools, the proposed online career portfolio system, training/professional development for faculty and staff, additional pay for faculty career coordinators and general costs associated with the administration of a QEP (publicity/printed materials and staffing):

1. Costs associated with an online portfolio system.
2. Annual cost of the Intercultural Development Inventory (currently \$18 for each faculty/staff and \$12 for each student).
3. Cost of training an IDI-qualified administrator(s) to conduct the survey.
4. Funds to pay for expert/guest speakers or trainers on interpersonal and intercultural competence.
5. Funds to support the review and enhancement of soft skills pedagogy.
6. Course release or overload pay for one faculty member in each college/school to serve as a career coordinator. Career-focused professional development for Career coordinators.
7. Costs associated with publicity and printed materials.
8. General staffing costs associated with the administration of a QEP

Conclusion

The skills necessary for success in the global economy are the same skills that students need to develop in order to maximize their academic success. Preparing our students for life after college, whether that is a career or further education, requires a comprehensive approach to student development from both inside and outside of the classroom. The Soft Skills for Student Success QEP is designed to maximize involvement across the institution, with an equal level of contributions from academic and non-academic units. This balanced approach of curricular and co-curricular programming will ensure that students are engaged in the initiatives of this quality enhancement plan and yield student learning outcomes and student success outcomes that will promote lifelong education and growth.

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