

# BEYOND THE DEGREE: PORTABLE SKILLS FOR TOMORROW'S GRADUATES

By Frank Sánchez

Changing industry talent needs and the push for degree production are shaping the narrative for many college and university executives. High-skills, high-wage jobs are increasingly being identified as state economic drivers, and institutions are being charged to respond. Similarly, performance funding mandates further signal efforts to improve graduation rates, infusing human talent and resources into local economies. Indeed, our intellectual engines for economic development are being encouraged to have a tune-up.

Like other higher education institutions, Rhode Island College (RIC) is actively examining how our teaching and learning enterprise can support state economic needs. In fact, the RIC Undergraduate Curriculum Committee is currently examining the feasibility of a 21st Century Skills Requirement, embedding experiential learning elements across the curriculum and better preparing graduates for a competitive regional workforce or graduate school options. Unfortunately, this requirement does not go far enough to provide the kind of portable skills essential for tomorrow's graduates and today's workforce.

It is a virtual certainty that graduates will not secure a lifetime career with their first job. Today's workforce environment demands that graduates not only enhance their skills to keep up with shifting industries, but the possibilities of our graduates changing industries altogether have also increased. Due to growing competition for talent, the likelihood is increasing that many graduates may not start in their field of choice or preparation. In either case, to help students be successful, colleges should consider investing in helping them develop an assortment of portable skills.

In addition to learning outcomes, colleges and universities have an opportunity to identify the navigational skills graduates need to succeed. For example, what skills do engineering graduates have if they are not using their engineering degree? The same could be asked for other majors: Teaching? Business? Nursing? Beyond curricular knowledge and the ability to demonstrate that knowledge through paper or online examinations, graduates are increasingly asked to demonstrate to employers and society in general a variety of important skills, including:

## Situational Skills

How well can graduates apply their content knowledge to changing circumstances? Can they solve problems that arise in changing contexts and environments? Are all students given opportunities to demonstrate their abilities through laboratory work, internships, project-based activities, arts, theater, music, capstone projects, and more? If so, how do colleges measure these skills and outcomes? Colleges are in a position to enhance traditional curriculum by elevating the importance of situational creativity, critical thinking, innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit.

## Adaptive Skills

How do graduates demonstrate resilience? Are they able to effectively manage varying levels of pressure, challenge and failure? Can they respond to significant dissonance or ambiguity with workplace supervisors, personal, financial or individualized challenges? How colleges help students adapt to adversity and demonstrate resolve, grit and the ability to adjust will be critical as they navigate a rapidly evolving workforce. The portability of these adaptive skills will be invaluable as graduates maneuver post-college work and life.

## Self-Development Skills

Portable skills prepare graduates for both the workforce and personal success. How do our graduates demonstrate social responsibility, inclusion and emotional intelligence? Do they have the ability to interact with individuals who are different from themselves? Clearly, the success of our graduates can be measured by landing a great job. In the tradition of the liberal arts, the higher education community should also help our graduates, in a measured way, be civically minded and part of an engaged citizenry.

As we look beyond a college degree to produce well-rounded individuals who are productive members of society, much more needs to be addressed to really develop oneself and inspire self-reflection. These self-development skills can encourage graduates to become active participants in an engaged citizenry. While the "hard skills" in a chosen field are equally important, investing in the skills to adapt and respond to a changing environment are increasingly valued and essential to career and personal success. **P**

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