



Workforce development serves as a critical community-college mission. This issue of *Instructional Leadership Abstracts* chronicles how one institution used feedback from key stakeholders to rethink its general education curriculum.*

Strengthening General Education-Back to the Basics

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Demographic shifts are rapidly changing workplace dynamics. As a result, community colleges must respond to an ever-increasing array of complex workforce needs that challenge our processes for general education and program development. A recent *Leadership Abstract* by Tony Zeiss (2004) highlights the future labor shortage, and challenges community colleges to prepare for it with regard to staffing patterns and leadership development. Zeiss quotes U. S. Bureau of Labor statistics that indicate, by 2011, the United States economy will have 168 million jobs, but only 158 million workers. We are currently in the middle of this labor-market transformation. Between 1998-2008, 53.8 percent of all workers aged 45 or older are projected to permanently leave their occupation, without sufficient numbers of workers to replace them (Dohm, 2000).

Surprising Research

Against this backdrop, Metropolitan Community College (MCC) began assessing the relevance of its general education degree requirements and stumbled upon some surprising findings. Faculty and staff on the general education review committee assessed the higher education literature, examined more than 25 other community colleges for best practices, and surveyed the perceptions of employers, faculty and student services staff. However, it was the employer survey that provided the surprise. More than 450 local employers were surveyed for their perceptions of the skills most necessary for success in entry-level positions. The results were not what the committee expected.

A total of 268 survey responses from all sectors of the diverse metropolitan Omaha area labor market were received. Faculty and staff anticipated employers' responses to parallel their own - - students should be able to read, write, do math, play well with others, use a computer, etc. Employers, on the other hand, responded to the list of 30 skills with the following top-ten selections (in rank-order): 1) attendance and punctuality; 2) customer-service skills; 3) desire to learn; 4) ability to work as part of a team; 5) oral communication skills; 6) follow-through; 7) professionalism; 8) respect for diversity; 9) time-management skills; and 10) problem-solving skills.

MCC also collaborated with the local Greater Omaha Tri-County Workforce Investment Board to contract with a consultant to interview key community stakeholders regarding workforce needs. Two major findings from this qualitative study included:

- Employability skills and a strong work ethic are traits most desired by business representatives - - and the traits seen as most lacking among new hires.
- Young people coming through the educational pipeline are woefully unaware of the nature of work, workplace expectations, and the demands of success.

General Education Implications

Faced with these results, the general education committee needed to reconcile the differences between employer perceptions and those of faculty and staff. The group has not yet completed their recommendations, but is moving toward making these workplace literacies the foundation of general education, threaded throughout the entire curriculum. This process has changed the focus from simply having the cafeteria approach to general education to also infusing competencies and skills throughout the curriculum. This is in keeping with recent recommendations from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2004).

In addition to these foundational skills, the committee is also considering developing high-level competencies such as critical thinking, numeracy, information literacy, communication, scientific inquiry, and social/cultural awareness. The combination of foundational skills and general education competencies would be taught in certain required courses and then reinforced throughout all of the curricula. This approach will require college-wide faculty development efforts for full-time and adjunct faculty to successfully infuse these concepts throughout the entire curriculum.

However, the college recognized that just enhancing its general education approach was not enough. Faculty and staff also reached out to the business community to better understand these skills gaps and develop a concerted effort to improve the available pool of qualified workers.

Strengthening General Education...cont.

Program Development Implications

The Greater Omaha Tri-County Workforce Development Board that manages local workforce investment act dollars was interested in the college responding with a proposal to implement a short-term training program. This program would address employer needs and serve the 1,200-1,500 monthly job-seekers coming through the one-stop career centers. Four employer focus groups were held throughout the college's service area to gain feedback on this proposed program. Employers were very receptive of the 24 (quarter credit) hours of training and confirmed the skill gaps identified in the surveys.

The proposed courses will include content around employability skills, applied communication, basic math, problem-solving, reading for the workplace, human relations, computer fundamentals, and customer service (re-titled the Secrets of Business Success). Given the range of potential students - - high school students, currently unemployed and under-employed, as well as skill upgrades for incumbent workers - - this program will need to be modularized, use learning communities to increase retention, and employ assessments like WorkKeys®, which allow students to move through the program as they secure each skill.

In light of these profound demographic shifts and workplace needs, employers are looking for solutions to this competency deficit (Herman, Olivo, & Gioia, 2003). The situation is not likely to be isolated to the metropolitan Omaha area and, therefore, should be given consideration everywhere, as put forth by Syracuse University Professor Bill Coplin, in his book, *10 Things Employers Want You to Know* (2003). Community

colleges can provide at least part of the solution with focused and relevant efforts in this area. Attempting to quickly help the "unemployable" become "employable" is a daunting task that places a new spin on remediation - - one that requires a shift in focus from content areas to more intrinsic issues like motivation, attitude, and respect for others. As a result, community colleges must intentionally seek to understand these workforce needs in their local service area and respond with multiple, creative solutions.

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