

Alumni and Career Readiness
Career and Student Employment
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Executive Summary

The assessment project was designed to provide Career and Student Employment Services with data on NACE career readiness competencies. The goal was to find out which were most developed while attending Western Michigan University, what experiences contributed to the growth and what, if anything, did the participant wished they had done while at WMU that would have strengthened their career readiness competencies. A survey was sent out to alumni who had graduated in the past two years and who had reported full time work which led to 322 participants. From there, the data was interpreted. This led to discovering critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, and teamwork/collaboration were rated the three more important skills in the participant's work place. Themes were also collected for each competency on what experiences contributed to the development which varied by topic. For what alumni wished they had, the three top results were internships/shadowing, career management, and real world problems in the classroom. With this data, Career and Student Employment Services has decided to implement new changes into their work during the upcoming years and reach out to other departments where collaboration would be beneficial.

Introduction

The goal of this assessment project is to look at what co-curricular experiences alumni participated in during their time at Western Michigan University and if they had an impact on the development of NACE competencies. Looking at alumni experiences will help to better assess which types of activities to offer and how they contribute to a student's development. All career advisors incorporate The National Association of Colleges and Employers career readiness competencies into their work as a guide on what is believed to help make students successful post-graduation. These competencies were developed, "...through a task force of college career

services and HR/staffing professionals, has developed a definition based on expensive research among employers, and identified eight competencies associated with career readiness” (Career Readiness Defined, n.d.). These competencies, “will close the gap between higher education and the world of work” (Career Readiness Defined, n.d.). Additionally, they help provide insight on the work necessary to prepare college students to be successful in the work force. The competencies are as followed: critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency. Additionally, we are hoping to use this project as a way to see what experiences alumni wish they had. This will help us identify which NACE competencies need to be more focused on for both within our office and our campus partners.

Assessment Method

Alumni who completed the Post-Graduate Activity Report (PGAR) and indicated having a full-time position after graduation will be contacted to complete a survey. (See Appendix). Questions of the survey involve both open and closed ended questions to gather a variety of data. This involved rating the importance of the career readiness competencies in their work as well as which one they feel they developed the most in. From there, open ended questions were asked to see what experiences alumni had related to the competency as well as what they wished they would have been involved in while attending Western Michigan University. Questions were also asked regarding the industry the participant works in and their position title. Additionally, follow-up emails were sent out to those who had not responded.

Summary of Assessment Data

To complete our assessment, we used an online survey sent out to 2,227 graduates from 2016-2017 and 1,254 graduates from 2017-2018 who reported full time employment. Through

the survey, we asked 6 questions about NACE's Career Readiness Competencies as well as the alumnus job function and industry. (See survey questions in Appendix) We were able to gather 322 respondents. Of these respondents, 10.5% came from higher education, 10.2% from healthcare, 6.5% Automotive. (Table 1)

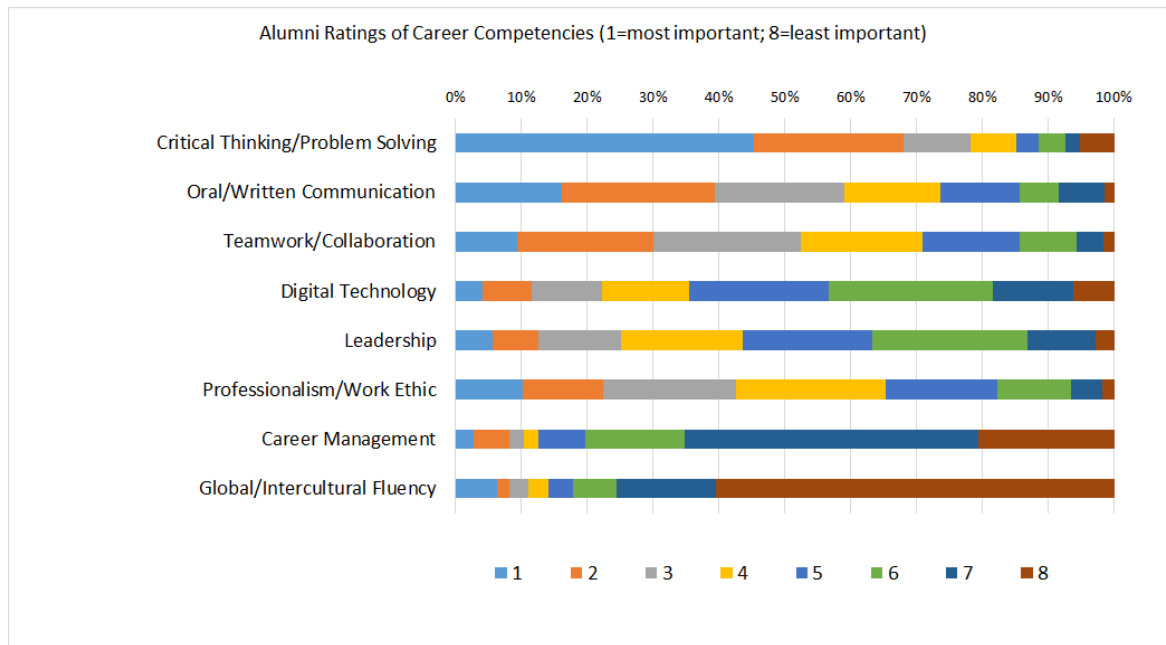
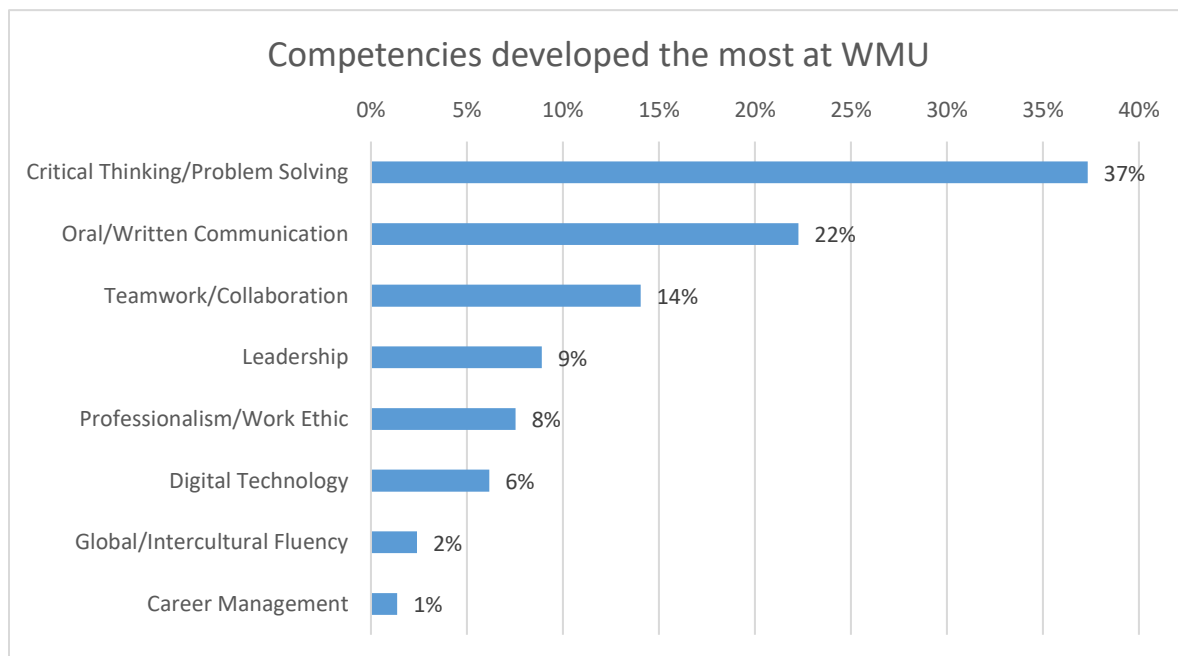
Table 1

Industries Respondents Work In	Amount of People who Answered from that Industry	Percentage
Advertising, PR and Marketing	5	1.5%
Aerospace	5	1.5%
Architecture and Planning	2	0.6%
Automotive	21	6.5%
Biotech and Life Sciences	2	0.6%
Civil Engineering	1	0.3%
Commercial Banking and Credit	3	0.9%
Construction	3	0.9%
CPG - Consumer Packaged Goods	9	2.7%
Defense	4	1.2%
Design	3	0.9%
Electronic and Computer Hardware	2	0.6%
Environmental Services	1	0.3%
Fashion	1	0.3%
Food and Beverage	10	3.1%
Forestry	1	0.3%

Government - Local, State and Federal	15	4.6%
Healthcare	33	10.2%
Higher Education	34	10.5%
Human Resources	3	0.9%
Insurance	2	0.6%
Interior Design	2	0.6%
Internet and Software	2	0.6%
Investment Banking	1	0.3%
Investment/Portfolio Management	3	0.9%
K-12 Education	15	4.6%
Legal and Law Enforcement	1	0.3%
Management Consulting	2	0.6%
Manufacturing - Other	16	4.9%
Medical Devices	5	1.5%
Movies, TV, Music	1	0.3%
Natural Resources	1	0.3%
NGO	1	0.3%
Non-Profit - Other	12	3.7%
Oil and Gas	1	0.3%
Other Education	1	0.3%
Other Industries	15	4.6%
Pharmaceuticals	13	4.0%
Real Estate	1	0.3%

Research	3	0.9%
Retail Stores	7	2.1%
Scientific and Technical Consulting	1	0.3%
Social Assistance	2	0.6%
Sports and Leisure	1	0.3%
Tourism	1	0.3%
Transportation and Logistics	4	1.2%
Utilities and Renewable Energy	2	0.6%
Wholesale Trade	1	0.3%
(blank)	4	1.2%
Grand Total	322	100%

The first question asked respondents to rate the importance of career readiness competencies in their work place on a scale of 1-8 with 1 being the most important and 8 being the least. Our results show that almost 70% of people rated Critical Thinking and Problem Solving in their top two answers. The next was Oral and Written Communication with 39% of people having rated this their first or second choice. Teamwork was next as 30% of respondents had this competency in their top two, followed by Professionalism/Work Ethic at 22%, Leadership at 13%, Digital Technology at 12%, and then Career Management as well as Global/Intercultural Fluency at 8%. (Shown in Figure 1.1) Additionally, 37% of alumni mentioned they developed the most in critical thinking and career management the least at 1%. (Figure 1.2)

Figure 1.1**Figure 1.2**

The next question asked was, “Please describe how you developed or strengthened this competency at WMU through both in and out of classroom experiences”. Looking at Critical

Thinking and Problem Solving, salient themes included a participant's classroom experiences, projects/assignments, internships/jobs, and registered student organizations. Other activities were also mentioned such as mentors, speaking with employers, and research. One of the alumni stated, *"Most classes do a great job at teaching critical thinking. Activities outside of class such as Formula or Baja SAE strengthen [my] skills through tough problem solving"*

For Oral and Written Communication, alumni expressed they felt their program of study contributed to this skill development as well as writing papers, giving presentations and conducting research. Other topics mentioned were academic projects, registered student organizations, professors, networking or their internship/job. One of our alumni said, *"I strengthened my oral and written communication skills through seminar-type classes where I was required to speak and in writing assignments where I was required to clearly and concisely make my arguments. My professors always gave helpful feedback in both of these areas."*

With Teamwork and Collaboration, the top way alumni said they developed in this skill was through participating in multiple group projects during their time at WMU. One alumnus stated, *"The majority of the classes I took for my degree at WMU required group assignments. Usually these assignments last the duration of the semester or a few weeks working with groups of 3-4 students. We were required to work together to complete assignments in and out of the classroom on our own time. This is something I felt I lacked before attending WMU & developed the skill through the many group course assignments I completed."* with another saying, *"The WMU MBA program has a substantial focus on teamwork and group related work; almost to a negative. I think the program helped individuals understand the need for co-dependency on some projects, but it also creates an ability for some individuals to rely on others and not apply their best individual effort. However, this focus does help those with a desire to succeed to develop*

that leadership and teamwork mentality” Other themes included classroom work, colleagues/classmates, RSO’s (registered student organization), or other co-curricular activities such as research, case studies, intermural sports, fraternity/sorority life, and projects with companies.

For respondents, leadership was best developed through class projects, registered student organizations, having leadership roles on campus, class, having a graduate assistantship on campus and sports. One of the alumni who had a graduate assistantship shared, *“At my GA site, I was given a lot of tasks that required me to demonstrate leadership and decision making. Through my experiences with students, peers and supervisors I was able to learn different leadership styles and develop a method for leading and supervising others. In the classroom, I was able to learn more about leadership through course content. I learned different methods and theories related to student development and learned the importance of navigating politics and managing the work environment.”*

Alumni described developing professionalism and work ethic the most through student organizations, classes, and internships/jobs being at the top with other things including creating resumes, mentors, and professors. This can be displayed by one alumnus who said, *“The classes at WMU have challenged me in a way that made me want to be better than I thought I could be. Sometimes classes made it seem like it was impossible to graduate, and it taught me coping mechanisms for when I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. My experience was that the challenges don't always have a great reward, but the work ethic that you gain from that is invaluable.”*

Global and Intercultural Fluency, Career Management, and Digital Technology all had a salient theme of class with Global and Intercultural Fluency also having internships/jobs. What helped students the most in this area was their environment pushed them to be better in this area.

The last question asked, “What do you wish you would have done while at WMU to further develop your career readiness competencies?”. The most said answer was more internships and job shadowing opportunities. Close behind was many participants listed that they should have been more involved in a variety of career management opportunities and resources on campus. One person mentioned, “I wish that I had more career experiences that were more in-depth and that were earlier on in college”. This was followed by the answer of wanting their curriculum and college experience to include handling more real-life problems they would see in their career.

Other themes in the middle involved having more digital experience, networking, and involvement in registered student organizations. Some alumnus touched on these topics when stating, *“I wish I would have taken technology classes more seriously in school because I am now using Microsoft Office daily, especially Excel where I was the least competent”* or wishing they had increased their involvement, *“Looking back, I wish I would have started my involvement with extra-curricular activities in my first year, this would have opened many more opportunities to sharpen my competencies by engaging in activities out of my comfort zone.”* Conferences, mentorship programs, more diversified classes, and more major specific classes were mentioned but not as often.

Discussion of Assessment Results

To discuss the results, the Associate Director of Assessment for Career and Student Employment Services and myself looked at the data to interpret what this may mean for the department and other areas of the university. Some of the results were not surprising. In our

knowledge of working with employers, students who wished they had more internships or shadowing opportunities understand this opportunity increases a student's chance to connect class work with real life and have more experience in the field. Employers are looking for these experiences in future employees and want them to have knowledge and background of what is currently happening in the industry. Many times, those who have these experiences are more likely to get called back for interviews. This led to conversations about what departments currently require internships before students graduate and how much help is provided to obtain one. This could also include incorporating these experiences into the curriculum where almost every student can leave real hands-on experience in their field and have an increased chance of finding work post-graduation. Another data result we did not find surprising was the top three career competency ratings of critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, and teamwork/collaboration as these are crucial skills professors, and the university, are trying to accomplish using their curriculum, and programming, because these skills are deemed as important for success. One aspect which was surprising is digital technology was rated very low compared to what was expected. As technology has been increasing, along with more incorporation into many practices, it was predicted this one may move up higher on what participants found important within their jobs. Based on the data of what alumni wished they had, the discussion ended with how can Career and Student Employment Services, as well as other key players on campus, provide more intentional opportunities and increase the amount of students to be involved in career management and develop in all eight competencies. Through this, some new strategies were created. Some limitations of this study is there was a larger amount of certain industries who chose to participate in the study and other industries were not

reached at all. This does not give us the full picture of all career paths for Western and may change what populations targeted in future work.

Plan for Use of Assessment Results/Improvements

Our goal will be to use this data to incorporate new strategies for Career and Student Employment Services and share it with partners on campus who would benefit from it.

For Career and Student Employment Services within in department:

1. Pick 10-20 groups on campus who are lacking in obtaining these experiences, or with career management, and target them in programming and fairs.
2. Cross reference this data with PGAR data to determine groups to target.
3. In workshops we host, we will have students write how they developed three career competencies needed in the work place.
4. Train career coaches on how to have conversations about career competencies when working with students.
5. A career readiness certificate is already in place to help all student workers on campus to learn about career competencies in the workplace.
6. Connecting more events to WMU Signature to increase the amount of students reached.

For collaboration with other departments:

1. Push an agenda to strongly encourage/require internships
2. A collaboration with essential students to incorporate making connections to career competencies to learning outcomes of the class.

Looking at the results of this assessment, Career and Student Employment Services was pleased to see alumni recognized the value of participating in career management activities and internships. However, being able to reach more students sooner and more in depth would be

better to change the data in ways alumni felt the developed career readiness competencies. This data also demonstrates collaboration across departments would be the best way to increase opportunities for students. Although Career and Student Employment Services provides a multitude of experiences for students to be involved, it takes other key stakeholders to see the value of this work and directly use their position to connect in more partnerships. One of these key stakeholders may be department heads who assist in creating the curriculum for students. There are potential changes to be made for students to have career management built into their classes and for more required, or highly encouraged, internship programs. The institutions goal in the upcoming years is to not only focus on having a variety of experiential opportunities but increase the amount of students who are involved in them.

Plan for Reassessment

Our Plan for reassessment will involve thinking about this topic in another way. Through the discussion, it was decided more information needs to be collected on participants. This will increase our ability to connect data to populations that the department can target in programming. Additionally, our reassessment will involve asking more in depth qualitative questions that will provide us richer data and concrete examples. This was due to a large amount of respondents saying class made an impact on their development but more data could be collected on specific elements of class. The next assessment cycle will take place in three years to give the department time to implement new programs and strategies based on the data and see them play out.

References

Career Readiness Define (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/compentencies/career-readiness-defined/>