

ESSENTIAL WORK SKILLS AND READINESS: PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYERS, MBA STUDENTS, AND UNDERGRADUATES

Sohel Ahmad, St. Cloud State University
Michael J. Pesch, St. Cloud State University

ABSTRACT

In the ever-changing business landscape, it is important that graduates from business programs possess the essential skills needed by employers. Periodic surveys of employers and business students make important contributions in aligning employer needs in new-hires with student skill sets and expectations. In this study, we surveyed undergraduate and MBA students to assess their understanding of skills that employers thought were most important for new graduates to possess and the skills employers thought were most in need of improvement. The same survey was used to collect data from the employers. The responses were compared across the three groups: Undergraduate Students, MBA Students, and Employers.

The survey results for the skills that are 'Important to Possess' show that traditional MBA students need to realize that employers felt several skills to be more important to possess than what they thought. These skills include: 'honesty/integrity,' 'strong work ethic,' 'interpersonal skills (relates well to others),' 'professionalism/etiquette,' 'develop creative solutions' and 'think analytically.' Additionally, results suggest that both undergraduate students and MBA students should be aware that 'flexibility/adaptability' and 'detail-oriented' skills were considered more important by the employers than what students in both groups thought. Being aware that these skills are highly valued by employers is likely to help newly hired employees fit in better with their new work culture and thrive in the long-term.

For the 'Need to Improve' variables, there were a large number of skills that undergraduate students thought they needed to improve upon more than what employers felt they needed to. These include 'professionalism/etiquette,' 'honesty/integrity,' 'think analytically,' 'organizational skills,' 'knowledge of company/environment,' 'interviewing skills,' 'teamwork skills (works well with others)' and 'utilize technology.' There also were three additional skills that both undergrads and MBA students thought they needed to improve upon more than what employers felt they needed to, including 'communication (verbal and written),' 'leadership skills,' and 'interpersonal skills (relates well to others).'

Viewed positively, this could mean students, especially undergraduate students, will be proactive in enhancing the skills they think they need to improve upon and thereby exceed employers' expectations. But in another sense, focusing on improving so many skills that employers already feel are sufficient might diminish efforts to improve skills employers deem most in need of improvement. For the latter, employers gave significantly higher 'Need to Improve' scores than undergraduate students to the variables 'realistic expectations' and 'lose sense of entitlement.' One interpretation of these findings might be that although employers are generally

pleased with the skill sets of business students, employers prefer undergraduate students to be more patient and realistic in their expectations for career advancement.

INTRODUCTION

Employers often have voiced concerns about business school graduates' preparedness for entry-level jobs. Employers expect recent college graduates to possess certain skill sets that many of them lack. There can be many reasons for this discrepancy but an important cause of the problem may be that students are not aware of the skills valued by the employers. The purpose of this study is to understand whether business students are aware of the skills employers consider important, especially the skills employers think students need to improve upon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has shown that undergraduates start college full of misconceptions about employers' skill preferences (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005). Although a number of efforts have been made by researchers to understand employers' expectations in general (DuPre & Williams, 2011) and in specific fields (Tesone & Ricci, 2012), this subject remains not well understood by the students. Without a good understanding of the skill set valued by the prospective employers, it is not possible for the students to prepare themselves, even if they have the willingness and resources from the school to do so. Therefore, it is not surprising that a recent survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities found that nine out of ten employers judged recent college graduates as poorly prepared for the workforce in areas such as critical thinking, communication, and problem solving (Belkin, 2015).

In this study, we surveyed undergraduate and MBA students to assess their understanding of skills that employers thought were most important for new graduates to possess and the skills employers thought were most in need of improvement. The same survey was used to collect data from the employers. The responses were compared across the three groups: Undergraduate Students ("Undergrads"), MBA Students ("Grads"), and Employers.

The data from MBA students were collected from second-year students in a "traditional" MBA program designed primarily for recent college graduates. That is, the program did not require students to have post-baccalaureate or managerial-level job experience. These MBA students, while further along in their career development than Undergrads, nevertheless are recent college graduates who are still in the early stages of their careers, and we hypothesize that it would be many years before the perceptions of these MBA students would be similar to the respondents in the Employer survey. Having survey responses from each of these three groups provides a unique opportunity to analyze how students' understanding of employers' expectations might vary according to the stage of career development.

Previous studies investigating important skill sets for students as expected by prospective employers have compared either undergraduate students' views with those of the employers' (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Roth et al., 2010) or the graduate students' views with those of the employers' (Elmore, 2010; Hill et al., 2014). We add to the existing literature by taking a

comprehensive approach by comparing and contrasting views of all three groups (undergraduate students, graduate students, and the employers) simultaneously in the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the early 1990s the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has conducted an annual survey of what employers and job candidates (graduating seniors and recent graduates) want from each other. The Saint Cloud State University (SCSU) College Job Outlook Survey (also referred to as the Minnesota College Job Outlook Survey), where respondents were the employers, was started in 2004 to overcome several shortcomings of the NACE survey. Whereas NACE sampled fewer than ten Minnesota state employers (and even fewer that recruited from SCSU), the SCSU Survey samples dozens of organizations that participate in the three primary college job fairs in Minnesota state, representing a wide variety of economic sectors, including business services, telecommunications, education, financial services, government, healthcare, the military, manufacturing, non-profit/human services, restaurant/hospitality, retail, and technology. Although the NACE and SCSU surveys remain similar in some respects, the SCSU (mostly catering to Midwest employers) Survey has evolved somewhat differently as it has increasingly focused on the issues considered most important to its Midwest employer participants.

The SCSU College Job Outlook Survey is really two surveys: the 'Important to Possess' survey and the 'Need to Improve' survey. Each seventeen-item survey includes the same thirteen skills plus four additional skills that are unique to each survey. The 'Important to Possess' survey asks Employers "What skills do you feel are most important for new college graduates to possess?" The 'Need to Improve' survey asks Employers "What skills do you feel new college graduates most need to improve upon?" The instructions on each survey are to rate each skill on a 1-to-5 "Not at all important" to "Extremely important" scale.

To administer the two surveys to Undergrads and Grads, the leading question for each survey was rephrased. The 'Important to Possess' survey asked students "What skills do you think employers feel are most important for new college graduates to possess?" The 'Need to Improve' survey asked students "What skills do you think employers feel new college graduates most need to improve upon?" The two surveys were pilot tested on two small groups (eight students in each group) of Undergrads and Grads by asking each student to restate each item on the survey which was then compared with the original wording of the corresponding item to verify content validity and reliability. The survey items/skills for the 'Important to Possess' survey and the 'Need to Improve' survey are listed in Table 1 (column 1) and Table 2 (column 1) respectively.

Employers

The SCSU College Job Outlook Surveys (also called Minnesota College Job Outlook surveys) have been conducted every year since 2004. We used data from the 2013 SCSU College Job Outlook Survey. Its 82 respondents (64% response rate) were HR professionals (primarily recruiters) from a diverse range of public and private sector organizations. We limited our analyses to the 77 respondents with complete data on both surveys.

Undergraduate Students (“Undergrads”)

The SCSU College Job Outlook Survey with the leading questions rephrased was distributed in seven different upper-division (junior and senior level) management classes in 2013. It was described to the students as part of ongoing efforts to improve curricula and student services. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were collected from 253 Undergrads (96% overall response rate). Undergrads who failed to provide complete data on the seventeen items for a survey were not included in the analyses for that survey. This resulted in usable data from 250 Undergrads for the ‘Important to Possess’ survey and 242 Undergrads for the ‘Need to Improve’ survey.

Skill	3 = Grads or MBA Students (n=47)			2 = Employers (n=77)			1 = Undergrad Students (n=250)			Significant contrasts p=		
	Mean	sd	Rank	Mean	sd	Rank	Mean	sd	Rank	1 v 2	2 v 3	1 v 3
Communication (verbal and written)	4.74	0.44	1	4.81	0.56	1	4.82	0.42	1			
Honesty/integrity	4.51	0.72	2	4.77	0.65	2	4.74	0.56	2		0.022	0.015
Teamwork skills (works well with others)	4.36	0.67	3	4.51	0.68	6	4.53	0.66	4			
Ability to acquire learning	4.34	0.70	4	4.31	0.85	9	4.37	0.67	7			
Strong work ethic	4.28	0.65	5	4.60	0.73	3	4.57	0.56	3		0.005	0.003
Motivation/initiative	4.26	0.71	6	4.52	0.64	5	4.46	0.63	5			
Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)	4.17	0.73	7	4.55	0.60	4	4.43	0.67	6		0.003	0.015
Professionalism / etiquette	4.04	0.69	8	4.39	0.76	7	4.26	0.70	9		0.009	0.050
Customer service ¹	4.02	0.85	9	4.27	1.03	10	4.31	0.74	8			
Utilize technology	3.87	0.74	10	3.79	0.82	16	3.96	0.72	14			
Leadership skills	3.85	0.93	11	3.97	0.84	13	4.18	0.78	10	0.049		0.011
Flexibility/adaptability	3.83	0.79	12	4.38	0.71	8	4.09	0.78	11	0.004	0.000	0.035
Detail-oriented ¹	3.72	0.77	13	4.09	0.85	11	3.78	0.75	17	0.002		0.010
Organizational skills	3.70	0.91	14	4.03	0.76	12	3.96	0.78	13			
Ability to plan and manage a project ¹	3.57	0.85	15	3.62	0.89	17	4.01	0.78	12	0.003		0.005
Develop creative solutions ¹	3.51	0.91	16	3.90	0.68	14	3.82	0.75	15		0.037	0.012
Think analytically	3.51	0.98	17	3.88	0.83	15	3.82	0.77	16		0.014	0.016

¹ These items were not included in the "need to improve" survey.
The instructions are to rate each skill on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not at all important and 5 = extremely important.

Skill	3 = Grads or MBA Students (n=47)			2 = Employers (n=77)			1 = Undergrad Students (n=242)			Significant contrasts <i>p</i> =		
	Mean	<i>sd</i>	Rank	Mean	<i>sd</i>	Rank	Mean	<i>sd</i>	Rank	1 v 2	2 v 3	1 v 3
Communication (verbal and written)	4.34	0.89	1	3.92	0.94	4	4.23	0.91	2	0.010	0.014	
Realistic expectations ¹	4.17	0.96	2	4.27	0.85	1	3.97	0.92	6	0.012		
Work ethic	4.09	0.80	3	4.03	0.93	3	4.00	0.96	5			
Professionalism/ etiquette	3.96	0.98	4	3.73	1.05	8	4.10	0.91	4	0.003		
Knowledge of company/ environment ¹	3.85	1.00	5	3.87	0.97	5	4.21	0.87	3	0.005		0.014
Lose sense of entitlement ¹	3.77	0.94	6	4.08	1.04	2	3.43	0.99	15	0.000		0.035
Interviewing Skills ¹	3.77	1.05	7	3.51	0.98	9	4.25	0.91	1	0.000		0.002
Leadership skills	3.72	0.90	8	3.38	0.89	10	3.89	0.89	7	0.000	0.037	
Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)	3.72	0.97	9	3.36	0.98	11	3.76	0.98	9	0.002	0.048	
Motivation/ initiative	3.70	0.93	10	3.86	1.07	6	3.73	0.96	10			
Honesty/integrity	3.60	0.93	11	3.23	1.09	14	3.69	1.03	11	0.001		
Flexibility/ adaptability	3.53	1.10	12	3.82	0.94	7	3.51	1.00	14			
Think analytically	3.47	0.91	13	3.16	0.99	15	3.57	0.87	13	0.000		
Teamwork skills (works well with others)	3.40	0.97	14	3.27	0.97	12	3.81	1.05	8	0.000		0.014
Organizational skills	3.38	1.01	15	3.26	0.89	13	3.68	0.97	12	0.001		
Ability to acquire learning	3.06	1.03	16	2.86	0.97	16	3.18	1.09	16			
Utilize technology	2.62	1.10	17	2.66	1.13	17	3.05	1.23	17	0.015		0.025

¹ These items were not included in the "important to possess" survey.
The instructions are to rate each skill on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not at all important and 5 = extremely important.

There were 1.6% freshmen, 1.6% sophomores, 31.0% juniors, and 63.2% seniors (2.6% did not provide this information). Approximately 49% were management majors, 32% were other

business majors, and 16% were not business majors. Ages ranged from 19 to 48 years with a mean of 22.8 (4.4% were older than 30 years), 50.8% were female (1.6% did not identify gender), 12.0% had internships, 4.0% were veterans, and 78.3% were working while taking classes (the average was 24.23 hours/week with a range of 2 to 50 hours/week). Respondents could select multiple identity categories (thus the results may not add to 100%): 88.0% selected Caucasian, 5.8% Asian, 3.1% Black, 1.9% Hispanic, 0.8% American Indian, and 1.6% Other. Self-reported GPAs ranged from 2.0 to 4.0 (C to A) with a mean of 3.17. Finally, respondents indicated the highest level of education obtained by each parent. For each parent, the mean was some college and the mode was a college degree.

MBA Students (“Grads”)

The SCSU College Job Outlook Survey with the leading questions rephrased was also distributed to second-year MBA students in three MBA courses during the 2013-2014 academic year. Just as for Undergrads, the Grads survey was presented as a part of ongoing efforts to improve curricula and student services. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Complete data were collected from 47 Grads (100% response rate).

Ages ranged from 22 to 40 with a mean of 26.8 years (11% were older than 30), 46.0% was female (one student did not identify gender), 21% had internships, 7% were veterans, and 76.6% were working while in the MBA program an average of 38 hours/week (from 20 to 70 hours/week). Respondents could select multiple identity categories (therefore the results may not add to 100%): 80% selected Caucasian, 13% Asian, 0% Black, 4% Hispanic, 0% American Indian, and 6% Other. Self-reported undergraduate GPAs ranged from 3.0 to 4.0 (B to A) with a mean of 3.57. Respondents indicated the highest level of education obtained by each parent. The mean for each parent was some college. The mode for mothers was a college degree and the mode for fathers was high school (no college).

Special Note on Survey Administration

It is possible that some respondents from the Undergrads and Grads groups might find it challenging to distinguish between the meanings of “Important to Possess” and “Need Improvement.” A skill that is deemed “important to possess” might be confused with skills “needing improvement,” perhaps because if a skill is important, improvement of the skill would also be desirable. We addressed this potential bias in the responses by carefully and extensively explaining to both Undergrads and Grads groups the difference between the leading questions in the two surveys. Given the much higher level of experience and depth of understanding for Employer respondents, confusion between the two questions is less likely to be a problem in the Employer surveys.

DATA ANALYSIS

If we glance at the ranking of the ‘Important to Possess’ variable means (see Table 1), there seems to be agreement on ‘communication (verbal and written)’ and ‘honesty/integrity’ as they are very highly ranked across the three respondent groups. Such agreement is not apparent across

three groups for the ranking of the means of the 'Need to Improve' variables (see Table 2). While respondents were not asked to rank the variables, we are reporting the ranking based on the value of the means of the variables to provide cursory observations only. The statistical analysis of the data follows.

We ran MANOVA to check if dependent variables (seventeen items of the 'Important to Possess' survey) differed overall among three groups (Undergrads, Grads, and Employers). Wilks' Lamda (λ) was found to be 0.80, $p = 0.000$. The results indicated that a significant difference existed among three groups when all 'Important to Possess' dependent variables were considered jointly. MANOVA requires that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables be not significantly different across groups (Undergrads, Grads, and Employers). For this reason we also report Pillai's Trace, which is least sensitive to the violation of equality of covariance, in addition to Wilks' Lamda (λ) (Tang & Algina, 1993). Pillai's Trace was found to be 0.21 which is highly significant ($p = 0.000$) consistent with the result found by Wilks' Lamda (λ).

Next, we conducted analysis on each 'Important to Possess' dependent variable to find if the mean of that variable differed significantly across three groups. First, for each dependent variable, we checked if the assumption of homogeneity of variances across three groups was met using Levene's test (Gastwirth et al., 2009). If the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met, we performed one-way ANOVA for that variable and used Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post hoc test. Alternatively, if the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not met, we carried out a Welch ANOVA instead of a one-way ANOVA and used Games-Howell post hoc test. Welch ANOVA is also suggested where there are unequal group sizes (Games & Howell, 1976; Klahr & Nigam, 2004). Results are shown in Table 1.

A similar approach was used to analyze data collected from the 'Need to Improve' survey. We ran MANOVA to check if dependent variables (seventeen items of the 'Need to Improve' survey) differed overall among three groups (Undergrads, Grads, and Employers). Wilks' Lamda (λ) was found to be 0.67 ($p = 0.000$) indicating a significant difference existed among three groups when all 'Need to Improve' dependent variables were considered jointly. Pillai's Trace was found to be 0.34, highly significant ($p = 0.000$), supporting the result indicated by Wilks' Lamda (λ). Subsequently, we checked if the assumption of homogeneity of variances across three groups was met for each 'Need to Improve' dependent variable using Levene's test. If the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met, we performed one-way ANOVA for that variable and used Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post hoc test. Alternatively, we carried out a Welch ANOVA instead of a one-way ANOVA and used Games-Howell post hoc test if the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not met. Results are reported in Table 2.

RESULTS

First we discuss the results of skills 'Important to Possess' from Table 1. We focus on only those skills that were rated higher by Employers compared to both Undergrads and Grads, where the differences in mean ratings were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$). Employers felt that these skills were more important for candidates to possess than what Undergrads and Grads thought. Grads differed significantly from both the Employers and the Undergrads for the following skills: 'honesty/integrity,' 'strong work ethic,' 'interpersonal skills (relates well to others),'

‘professionalism/etiquette,’ ‘develop creative solutions’ and ‘think analytically’ where Grads rated these skills lower compared to Employers and Undergrads. This suggests that Grads need to be made aware that these skills are valued more by Employers than what they thought.

Both Undergrads and Grads differed significantly from Employers on ‘flexibility/adaptability’ and ‘detail-oriented.’ Since Employers scored these skills significantly higher than both Undergrads and Grads, it implies that both Undergrads and Grads failed to understand that these are skills highly sought after by Employers.

Next, we discuss the results of ‘Need to Improve’ skills from Table 2. We focus on those skills where the differences in mean ratings were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$) across at least two of the three respondent groups: Employers, Undergrads, and Grads.

Undergrads differed significantly from Employers for the following skills: ‘professionalism/etiquette,’ ‘honesty/integrity,’ ‘think analytically’ and ‘organizational skills.’ Each of these skills was rated higher by Undergrads as needing improvement compared to Employers. This implies that Undergrads respondents thought they needed to improve on these skills more than what Employers felt.

Undergrads also differed from the Employers on ‘realistic expectations’ but here Employers rated the need to improve significantly higher than Undergrads. This finding suggests that Undergrads need to do a better job of managing their expectations in the workplace.

Also in the ‘Need to Improve’ results, Undergrads differed significantly from both Employers and Grads on the following skills: ‘knowledge of company/environment,’ ‘interviewing skills,’ ‘teamwork skills (works well with others)’ and ‘utilize technology.’ Each of these skills received the highest scores by Undergrads among the three groups of respondents, whereas Employers and Grads felt these skills had lower needs for improvement.

Undergrads also differed significantly from both Employers and Grads on the skill ‘lose sense of entitlement’ in the ‘Needs to Improve’ results, giving this skill a lower score than Employers and Grads. This result indicates that Undergrads need to improve on ‘lose sense of entitlement’ significantly more than what they thought.

Employers significantly differed from both Undergrads and Grads on ‘Need to Improve’ scores for ‘communication (verbal and written),’ ‘leadership skills,’ and ‘interpersonal skills (relates well to others).’ Each of these skills was scored lower by Employers than by both Undergrads and Grads. This implies that students in both respondent groups thought they needed to improve on these skills more than what Employers felt.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results for the ‘Important to Possess’ variables, traditional MBA students need to realize that employers felt several skills to be more important to possess than what they thought. These skills include: ‘honesty/integrity,’ ‘strong work ethic,’ ‘interpersonal skills (relates well to others),’ ‘professionalism/etiquette,’ ‘develop creative solutions’ and ‘think analytically.’ Additionally, results suggest that both undergraduate students and MBA students should be aware that ‘flexibility/adaptability’ and ‘detail-oriented’ skills were considered more important by the employers than what students in both groups thought. Being aware that these skills are highly

valued by employers is likely to help newly hired employees fit in better with their new work culture and thrive in the long-term.

For the 'Need to Improve' variables, there were a large number of skills that undergraduate students thought they needed to improve upon more than what employers felt they needed to. These include 'professionalism/etiquette,' 'honesty/integrity,' 'think analytically,' 'organizational skills,' 'knowledge of company/environment,' 'interviewing skills,' 'teamwork skills (works well with others)' and 'utilize technology.' Additionally, employers also gave lower scores than both Undergrads and Grads to the skills 'communication (verbal and written),' 'leadership skills,' and 'interpersonal skills (relates well to others).'

Viewed positively, this could mean students, especially undergraduate students, will be proactive in enhancing these skills and thereby exceed employers' expectations. But in another sense, focusing on improving so many skills that employers already feel are sufficient might diminish efforts to improve skills employers deem most in need of improvement. For the latter, employers gave significantly higher 'Need to Improve' scores than undergraduate students to the variables 'realistic expectations' and 'lose sense of entitlement.' One interpretation of these findings might be that although employers are generally pleased with the skill sets of business students, employers prefer undergraduate students to be more patient and realistic in their expectations for their job and paths for career advancement.

Of special note is a surprising result for the 'Need to Improve' skill 'communication (verbal and written),' where both undergraduate and MBA students scored this skill higher than employers. This finding surprised us, not only because other studies reported that employers considered communication skills to be critical for career success (Orr et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2014) but particularly because we (faculty) received feedback from past employers that our students were weak on this skill. Based on this feedback from prospective and past employers, the Career Services Center at our university in the past few years launched a number of programs to make students aware of this issue. The results of this study seem to indicate that the message is getting through; students show an awareness of the need to improve communication skills and employers indicate that communication skills have improved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Career service centers and university/college leadership can play important roles in preparing students for future employers. University career counselors can work closely with the students to make them aware of different stakeholders' expectations during their college-to-work transition (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). The role of internships on students' marketability in the job market cannot be overemphasized (Gault et al., 2010). Having a wide network of organizations from various sectors of the economy offering internship opportunities to the students is crucial.

Developing and maintaining a network of professional contacts requires a well-staffed internship office, in addition to faculty champions. Programs such as 'Executives in Residence' that bring business practitioners to campus for a limited period of time can have a great impact on students' understanding of employers' expectations, in addition to other benefits (Johnston, 2013). Identifying interested and capable working or retired local business executives is the key to the success of such program.

The efforts to make students aware of employers' skill preferences should not be left for the senior year, and instead should start as early as in the sophomore year (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). Initiatives such as mock interviewing, job shadowing, mentoring by past graduates, providing internship opportunities, and instituting executives in residence programs require additional resources and therefore cannot be achieved without the full commitment of the university/college leadership and on-going efforts to fund these programs. There is a wide scope of future research opportunities in this area. Future research streams can focus on the efficacy of these initiatives in closing the gap between employers' and students' understanding of skill preferences.

CONCLUSION

An article in the Wall Street Journal (Gellman, 2015) indicates that the skill sets of job applicants are becoming so important that some employers such as Facebook, Intuit, Anheuser-Busch InBev, and Zappos are conducting what's being called "program hiring," where job applicants are hired based on trait-related skill sets before a specific job is assigned. Program hiring "identifies a person's transferrable talent, such as problem-solving or analytical ability, and then finds a job that puts those traits to the test." Unlike traditional employer programs that put new-hires through rotation programs to improve their skills in various organizational contexts, program hiring strives to hire people who already possess desirable skill sets. "As businesses large and small seek workers who can adapt to rapid technological or strategic shifts, companies are realizing they should recruit for innate abilities or attitudes, such as high motivation, rather than (technical) skills applicable to a particular job..." As employers become more focused on acquiring new-hires with the "transferable" trait-related skills in our survey, business schools that understand best these essential skills, will be able to prepare their students for future success.

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