

Integrating Technical Skills and Soft Skills to Ensure Student Success

Kathy Kennedy

Kathy Kennedy earned her master's degree in public administration from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her bachelor's degree from Hollins College. Assuming the duties of Manager of the Office of Research, Planning, and Analysis for Texas State Technical College West Texas two years ago, Ms. Kennedy directed the reaffirmation of the school's accreditation process, including the development of the TSTC West Texas Quality Enhancement Plan. She is a member of the Sweetwater Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, an avid reader, and an enthusiastic—if not always successful—gardener.

Why do students succeed in the workplace? What skills do they need to obtain and keep a job? Once we know what those skills are, how can we help our students master them? More fundamental, perhaps, is the question: what is Texas State Technical College's definition of student learning, and how do we facilitate that learning? All of these questions arose as TSTC West Texas investigated possible topics for its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). A Quality Enhancement Plan is required by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) as part of the new Reaffirmation of Accreditation process.

Through the strategic planning process, the TSTC West Texas college community discussed the needs of our students, the problems they arrive with, and the challenges they face while in college. The faculty and staff in West Texas considered these challenges, even while Aprilsue Grulick pondered this issue and concluded, "Our students never seem to be as ready for the rigors of college as we'd like them to be. Why is this?" (*Best Practices*, Fall 2004). We analyzed statistics about our students and our programs. Then, we surveyed our business and industry partners and began to see another aspect of student learning, other skills that our students need in the workplace. The term "soft skills" began to surface. Attitude, communication skills, work ethic, critical thinking, problem solving—all of these skills were identified by advisory committee members as essential aspects of the successful employee in today's workplace.

Interestingly, a comprehensive literature review undertaken by the QEP team revealed that soft skills are a widespread concern of employers world-wide. One example of the depth of the concern is evident in a series of interviews with executives of information technology companies. Those interviewed stated that it was not the lack of technical skills that caused projects to fail; rather, it was the lack of interpersonal/soft skills. So, our advisors are not the only ones who are concerned about the non-technical skills of applicants and employees.

The QEP team next addressed how to help students develop soft skills. First, the team had to identify skills and the specific ones we would attempt to address. How better to identify those skills than to again ask our industry advisors for help. Surveys and meetings led to the creation of a list of agreed-upon skills. We also asked our graduates to tell us some of the challenges they face as new hires. The responses that came back mentioned interpersonal and other communication problems as basic as, “How do I answer the telephone correctly?”

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The QEP team’s commitment to helping students understand and develop soft skills grew as the evidence of the significance of soft skills to success mounted. One of our QEP team members, Jim Williams, published a paper entitled “The Complete Technician” to help the team identify methods to aid students in developing soft skills. Finally, the QEP team, and the numerous subcommittees created to respond to specific needs of the plan, established a course of action to improve the preparation of students for the “world of life and work after graduation.” The college adopted a plan to integrate the specific soft skills approved by each program’s advisory committee into the students’ college

experience, both in and outside of the classroom. Such a plan requires the thoughtful and intentional use of soft skills as methods of teaching and as a means of interacting with students on all levels. No employee is exempt from the responsibility of helping students become more adept in demonstrating their soft skills. Each of us is charged with being a role model for our students.

Over the last six months, members of our college community have participated in a number of activities to train TSTC faculty to be role models, to increase our awareness of what it is to have and use soft skills, and to help us integrate soft skills. A Professional Development Course was established to introduce all of the soft skills to students. Inspired by our literature review and experts drawn from outside the college, we are acting intentionally to explain to students how important soft skills and technical skills are to success in the workplace. During the SACS on-site visit, the effectiveness of that strategy was clear. When asked by one of the reviewers what the students had learned about soft skills, one student explained: “Well, I figured out why I was fired from my last job.”

QEP team members agreed that professional development for both faculty and staff is essential to the college’s plan. Development is being approached from an internal and external perspective. To infuse new ideas and concepts, experts from outside TSTC have been asked to do presentations. Three experts in the area of critical thinking and interpersonal relations have presented to faculty and staff workshops on critical thinking and interpersonal relations. Internally, faculty and instructional

personnel have created learning teams, using WebCT as an instructional vehicle, to discuss teaching methodologies and the ideas generated by the various workshops. Throughout TSTC West Texas members of the college community are becoming involved in Etiquette Dinners and Professional Dress Weeks designed to help students make the transition to the work environment.

TSTC West Texas entered into the creation of a quality enhancement plan because we wanted to improve student learning; but, let's be honest, we also knew we had to develop a plan that SACS would approve. What we found at the end of this journey of self-evaluation and exploration was something ever so much more important. Yes, we developed an acceptable plan and, yes, we know we will improve student learning, but we also learned a great deal about our own abilities to solve problems, to exercise critical thinking, and to work creatively and energetically in teams. Like our students who are evolving into more technically skilled, mature members of our society, we too underwent a transformation. One of our QEP team members, Brian Kight, summarized in the QEP some of the consequences of the process:

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Although the QEP's primary stated focus is the enhancement of student soft skills, an unintended and unanticipated result of the QEP development and planning process has been the exercising of, and enhancement of, those very same skills within the organization itself. As it turns out, the process of developing the QEP has, in certain aspects, turned into a microcosm of the project itself. At the very least, the process has tested our own abilities with regard to the soft skills we say, and their potential employers are saying, the students need so badly. We recognize now more than ever that the importance of reinforcing, and seamlessly integrating, these soft skills into all areas of the college, not just those in the classroom and in the student's course of study. This unintended consequence should result in an overall upgrade of the organization, its effectiveness, its ability to adapt, and the quality of its employees. If we are going to model what we say the student needs to become, we will have to further hone our own skills, do regular self-assessments, and conduct training accordingly.

We are already experiencing some of the intangible rewards described by Richard Kirk in his call for essays for this issue of *Best Practices*. These rewards grew out of our planning process. Now we are looking forward to the future when our students are rewarded in more tangible ways for their soft skills.

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