

# Examining Cocurricular Leader Alumni's Perceptions of Soft Skill Preparedness: A Phenomenological Study

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## Overview

Using phenomenological inquiry, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of a group of young professionals who held cocurricular leadership positions as undergraduates. Specifically, its aim was to better understand how seven of these young professionals described the experience of developing their soft skills and then transitioning those skills into their careers. This executive summary offers an overview of the project and its findings in the hopes that it aids cocurricular educators in their work.

## Significance

A disconnect exists between undergraduate and employer perceptions of the soft skill readiness of college graduates. Several national surveys indicate employers believe that college graduates' soft skills are underdeveloped for the workplace (Hart Research Associates, 2018; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017; Society of Human Resources Management, 2019). Yet other studies show that undergraduate students, particularly those that are involved in cocurricular experiences, feel confident in their soft skill abilities (Kovarik & Warren, 2020; Peck et al., 2016; Siddicky, 2020). These conflicting perceptions regarding soft skills are problematic because:

- Employers value soft skills at least as highly as field-specific knowledge when hiring new employees (Hart Research Associates, 2013; Nuijten et al., 2017).
- Most students enroll in higher education as a source of career preparation and/or to improve their job prospects (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022; Stolzenberg et al., 2020).
- There is declining confidence in higher education and its mission among the U.S. public (Jones, 2018; Marken, 2019; Schleifer & Silliman, 2016).

Recent college graduates hold a unique viewpoint that may aid in clarifying the conflicting perspectives regarding their own soft skill preparedness. After all, they themselves have the most direct and relevant experience transitioning their soft skills from their undergraduate experiences into the workforce. Unfortunately, there are limited studies examining the perspectives of this population.

This study focuses on the lived experience of a group of young professionals who were cocurricular leaders. Specifically, it examines how they perceived their soft skill development in the context of their cocurricular involvement and how those skills and experiences transferred to their careers. It furthers the National Association for Campus Activities' research agenda by exploring the areas of "broad skill building" and "employability" by helping to demonstrate the value of campus involvement and justify the resources dedicated to such endeavors by higher education institutions (Rosch et al., 2021, p. 60).

## Methodology

The study was completed using a phenomenological methodology. Individual interviews were held with the aim of answering two research questions:

1. How do recent college graduates who were cocurricular leaders perceive their soft skills in their current work setting?
  2. How do recent college graduates who were cocurricular leaders describe the development of these soft skills in relation to their cocurricular experiences?
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Seven participants who met the following criteria comprised the sample:

- Graduated with a bachelor's degree between January 2018 and August 2019.
- Were between the ages of 22 and 28 years old.
- Were employed full-time in a position related to their preferred career field at the time of their interview.
- Were involved in at least one cocurricular leadership experience as an undergraduate.

Aside from these commonalities, participants came from a wide variety of institutions, fields of study, areas of cocurricular involvement, and professions.

Interview transcripts were broken down into isolated significant statements. These statements were then reviewed and grouped into thematic clusters which generated a list of emergent themes. These themes were later reviewed by participants to help validate the findings.

## Key Findings

### Research Question #1: How do recent college graduates who were cocurricular leaders perceive their soft skills in their current work setting?

- Participants believed they entered their careers with a well-prepared skillset and could utilize their soft skills competently. They believed their soft skill abilities to be above average when compared against a generic group of their peers.

*"I feel like I'm well above average on my soft skills because I feel like I had a lot of unique experiences in college that not a lot of other people really had. . . . Comparing myself to the peers within my class at [my university] or within my high school, I feel like I'm well above average from everyone else."*

*"I knew I was prepared, but just having a higher level of professionalism than maybe other 24-year-olds my age might not have, I think really helped for [the executive director of my workplace] not to look at me like 'we hired a teenybopper.' Instead, he was like, 'No, we hired a very nice young adult who knows what she's doing.'"*

- Participants viewed soft skill abilities as an indicator of positive job performance. The successful use of soft skills was perceived as developing professional capital that led to career advancement opportunities. It was also seen as a means of earning the respect of supervisors and older colleagues.

*"I later found out that [the managing partners making the hiring decision] were like, 'you have everything else, but we can train you to sit there and be an attorney. You might not know how to be an attorney yet, but that's the easy part.' The hard part is those personable skills, the ability to just talk to people and garner those relationships, those problem-solving skills, the ability to manage yourself and manage a team."*

*"I think I have been successful with using [my] soft skills. Like I said, when I started, I was in college as an intern at [the organization where I now work] and I got promoted to an accounts receivable clerk, I got promoted to the accountant/data manager, and I'm getting promoted next month to senior accountant. Even our executive director here, the big boss at [the organization], he'll even compliment me. Like, 'you're really quick at problem-solving,' or 'you have really good time management,' or 'you can really get people to work together.'"*

*“Showing that I have what it takes to do my job and do it well, I think that has helped. Helped [my older colleagues] almost look at me in a better way than I think they would look at most 25-year-olds. . . . I feel like my generation gets a weird perception, and what I'm doing is helping me overcome that.”*

- Each participant identified several soft skills they believed were important for success in the workplace. However, five specific soft skills were mentioned by almost all participants, signaling a collective importance. These five soft skills were communication, interpersonal skills, initiative/work ethic, problem-solving, and teamwork.

### **Research Question #2: How do recent college graduates who were cocurricular leaders describe the development of these soft skills in relation to their cocurricular experiences?**

- All participants described cocurricular involvement as a substantial learning experience that provided a practice space for the development of soft skills.

*“[My cocurricular involvement] was like a repetitive practice for me to use [my soft skills] weekly, monthly, and in our [sorority] meetings and day to day things where I had to continually work on things for the chapter or the accounting club, whichever it may be. But I definitely think that it helped because it gave me that practice . . . I think had I not been involved in those things, I wouldn't have had the exposure to using those skills.”*

*“If I wasn't in the extracurricular activities that I was, I wouldn't have turned into who I am. My soft skills wouldn't be where they're at today. . . . They impacted me greatly. They enabled me to be successful.”*

*“I loved being an RA. I think being an RA really shaped me for becoming who I am and gave me the soft skills and other skills that really have made me successful . . . I think that being an RA, and I think all of my cocurricular activities really, helped me develop the soft skills that I already had, or the soft skills that had been taught to me or that I learned growing up.”*

- Participants felt that cocurricular experiences provided meaningful workplace and career preparation through soft skill development. They provided several examples of parallels between their cocurricular involvement and career experience.

*“All these [cocurricular] roles I had, it was extremely helpful for me because a lot of stuff I did I [still] do today . . . showing leadership and initiative, working within teams. . . . So figuring out those maneuvers, it was definitely helpful that I got to learn it in college. I feel like [my cocurricular involvement has] been extremely impactful.”*

*“If I wasn't an RA or if I didn't run the conference, if I didn't do these various things, I would not then have the audacity or bravery or tenaciousness to do the things that I do in my professional life.”*

*“[My cocurricular involvement] really gave me the ability to shape those soft skills into how to use them professionally. How to take charisma and turn it into people skills or networking. . . . Taking those skills that are fun to have and then making them professionally beneficial.”*

## **Limitations**

- Inclusion criteria assured that participants' cocurricular involvement was not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic was disruptive to many workplaces and to the nature of work itself. While each participant described varying levels of workplace disruption, the demands of the

pandemic may have changed the ways that participants and their colleagues and supervisors viewed, valued, and exercised various soft skills.

- Two unintentional commonalities existed among participants: six of seven participants were white (the seventh was Asian American) and five of the seven had either earned or were in the process of completing advanced degrees (with a sixth working toward two graduate certificates). It is unclear how a more representative sample would have impacted the findings of the study.

## Implications

- Participants described their career experiences as requiring the same skills used during their cocurricular involvement, but several expressed some level of surprise at these parallels. Cocurricular educators should help to ensure current cocurricular leaders understand the transferrable nature of soft skills. It would also be beneficial to coach these students on how to present these skills and experiences in their cover letters, resumes, and interviews.
- Several participants felt interactions with professionals (both university staff and those in their intended field) during their cocurricular experiences enhanced their soft skill development and their professional growth. Intentional mentorship programs pairing undergraduates with young professionals who had similar cocurricular experiences may benefit these students in preparing to transition into the workforce.
- Participants felt cocurricular experiences aided in their soft skill development both through providing real opportunities to practice those skills and having those experiences occur in a safe, low-risk environment. Cocurricular educators must work to support the balance of these conditions.
- Employers may wish to pay special attention to the cocurricular involvement of entry-level applicants and probe candidates on the depth and specifics of those experiences during interviews.

## Future Research

Purposeful research questions that may guide future studies include the following:

- What differences exist in the self-perceptions of soft skills between young professionals with cocurricular leadership experiences and their peers without such experiences?
- What differences exist between young professionals' self-perceptions of soft skill preparedness and their supervisors' perceptions of the young professionals' soft skill preparedness?
- What differences do employers perceive in the soft skill abilities of young professionals with cocurricular leadership experiences and those without such experiences?

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## Contact

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