



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Soft Skills Gap

On May 27, *The Chronicle* hosted a virtual forum called “The Soft Skills Gap,” which examined the disconnect between the lessons higher education teaches and the skills employers need, and how colleges can bridge that gap. The discussion focused on the development of soft skills in an environment that is increasingly remote and digital.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum, which was underwritten by Adobe. The first section is drawn from the conversation that Jeff Selingo, a *New York Times* best-selling author and former editor of *The Chronicle*, had with Carol Quillen, the president of Davidson College, in which they discussed making soft skills an integral part of what students learn. The second section comes from a talk between Goldie Blumenstyk, a *Chronicle* senior writer; Natasha Stough, Americas director for campus recruiting at Ernst & Young; and Jennifer Baszile, the assistant vice chancellor for career success at the University of California at Santa Cruz. They examined how employers and colleges can work together to better identify and develop the skills graduates need for the modern work force.

To hear the full discussion, access the archived version at:

<https://connect.chronicle.com/SoftSkillsForum.html?cid=cdp>



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Jeff Salingo



Carol Quillen

Jeff Salingo: How do you believe a liberal-arts education translates to the cultivation of the soft skills that we're talking about today?

Carol Quillen: If you develop curiosity, resourcefulness, persistence, empathy, and creativity, you get people who can navigate the unfamiliar, who can take initiative, who can work in a team, who can communicate effectively across diverse audiences, and who can make decisions with imperfect information. Developing the human capabilities helps us prepare students to exercise soft skills that employers seek.

Selingo: How can we better quantify that stuff that happens outside the classroom, which we know employers really value?

Quillen: Our career-development office works with our students to help them explain why this particular experience speaks to a skill that an employer wants. It's more about explicating it than it is about quantifying it. We want our student athletes to be able to say, Look, I have demonstrated my ability to bounce back from failure. I never give up. This is how I got to be good. We want to be able to value how life experiences of all kinds translate into potential skills that employers are looking for.

Selingo: How can administrators convince faculty members of the importance of considering the world of work? Many faculty members don't think it's their job to help students get a job, right?

Quillen: Draw on the traditions and missions specific to your institution.

Davidson's mission is leadership and service in the world beyond our campus. We are expecting our educational experiences to prepare students for a rich, meaningful, and impactful life that involves serving other people — and that usually includes a job. Looking beyond our four years is embedded in our mission. And that is true at many institutions. You're not just here for yourself and your own intellectual enrichment. You're here because you're trying to equip yourself to have an impact in the world that enriches the lives of other people.

Selingo: What role might digital badges play in documenting soft skills? Do you imagine trying to document what you're teaching or what students at Davidson are learning in ways that go beyond the traditional degree?

Quillen: I think digital badges — all kinds of alternative credentialing — are going to be really important, and it will be good for the country and good for the post-secondary educational sector.

Our students need to be able to connect the dots. I did this project, and I had to talk to people that I'd never met before. I had to find documents in many different libraries. I had to piece together an argument, and I produced this documentary, which speaks to a broad range of people, which is actually an effective communication piece. And that means that I'm good at doing X. I think it's helping people connect the dots for employers, rather than changing what we're doing dramatically.



Jennifer Baszile



Natasha Stough



Goldie Blumenstyk

Goldie Blumenstyk: Natasha, at Ernst & Young you hire thousands of new employees and interns a year, right?

Natasha Stough: Yes, just over 9,000 between our entry-level and M.B.A. positions, as well as our summer and winter intern programs. They come out with a lot of amazing skills and capabilities. One of the things EY is focused on is that digital mind-set, that analytical mind-set, a global mind-set. How do they work and team collaboratively in this globally interconnected world? There may be a level of expertise or domain knowledge that we need for certain positions, but I think there's more of some of the skills that have been discussed and those mind-sets.

Blumenstyk: What do you wish you heard from employers that would help you level set the kinds of skills that you want your students to graduate with?

Jennifer Baszile: More sustained, deeper engagement more often and throughout the academic year — and throughout a period of four to six years — that is more dimensional and that will help how we can implement it into the way that we prepare students.

Blumenstyk: There are a lot of techniques that colleges have started to use to improve students' work-life experiences — internships, project-based learning. They sound good on the campus side — as an employer, do you really look for those things, and how do you find them?

Stough: We love to see cross-collaboration at the universities between the different departments. So much of the work we do at EY is collaboration. So if we're seeing that at the university level — some of those real-world challenges — and they're tackling them collectively, it translates to the work that they'll be doing in a lot of business environments.

Blumenstyk: Where do you see them? Do you see them on students' résumés, or is it more like we're going to choose to go recruit at these schools because we know these schools are doing these things?

Stough: It's a bit of both. Part of it is what we see on the résumés, but part of it is we have a lot of good working relationships with many academic programs to not only advance our recruiting efforts and hire great talent, but to ensure students will be successful. No matter the job that they pursue once they graduate.

Blumenstyk: How do employers and colleges make sure that this process doesn't really exclude people? There's a long history of picking certain institutions, but it seems like there could be a lot of people with a lot of incredible skills out there right now.

Stough: We are looking more broadly thanks to technology, relationships, and to institutions evolving and moving to different options for their students. We can't be everything to everybody. We're

starting to shift; it's going to take us some time. We're really pushing the business to say, Don't just lean into a major. What are the skills and capabilities that you need, and how do we look at that more broadly, instead of, These are the only 10 programs we're going to recruit from.

Blumenstyk: That seems to present an important challenge for higher ed, because this effort on hiring for talent as opposed to degrees might make it harder for colleges to compete in these environments.

Baszile: So many interests are converging right now. The premium that families are placing on the economic mobility that is an inherent part of the investment in higher education, students' own desires, the value of research experiences, and on our campus, the number of first-generation and Pell-eligible students who come to our institutions really does provide us an opportunity to prepare and engage students

in new ways. The exciting thing that this conversation has helped surface is the shift to a conversation around skill development and not just prestige-related credentials.

Blumenstyk: How do you know you're successful at that? How do you know if you're really translating these skills to the students and preparing them for the next steps?

Baszile: It's not just a question of how we're preparing the students. It's how we're helping students surface what they're already doing. It's back to the idea that every experience across the college life cycle has value. Let's face it, when a recruiter comes on campus, they're only there for a very short while; they have real things that they are interested in focusing on, and part of our job is to help prepare students to surface that so that institutions and organizations really feel the value and the impact of the student experience.

This "Key Takeaways" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.