Workshop

Introduction: Developing Soft Skills in Tomorrow's Leaders

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ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS. communication, professionalism, employment, career, distance education, asynchronous

Increased global trade coupled with diversified employment opportunities have generated demand for college graduates possessing both discipline-oriented knowledge as well as a broad range of professional career skills. Professional skills, sometimes referred to as career or soft skills, encompass an array of proficiencies critical for workplace success. Although broadly defined, professional skills include the following: effective communication, the ability to solve complex problems and think critically, the ability to work within a team, effective use of technology, and the capacity to organize and prioritize work (Candy et al., 1994). Survey results indicate that many recent college graduates do not possess significant professional skill proficiency to meet industry employment needs

(Crawford et al., 2011; Hart Research Associates, 2015). Many horticulture curricula focus on discipline-oriented knowledge and skills, but development of professional skills may be overlooked or not fully developed.

The objective of this workshop presented at the American Society for Horticultural Sciences annual conference held at Atlanta, GA, in Aug. 2016 was to host a forum to exchange ideas regarding the need for professional skills in horticulture students. The workshop provided an opportunity to define professional skills, identify industry employment needs, and present and discuss teaching methods aimed at developing enhanced career skills in current and future students. The following workshop articles provide a diverse range of topics aimed at improving workforce readiness of students enrolled in horticulture degree programs.

The first article addresses industry needs, provides a review of workplace skill surveys, and identifies professional skills desired by hiring managers. The article discusses teaching methods designed to enhance professional skills while simultaneously allowing for continued development of discipline-oriented knowledge. The implementation of presented ideas directly address industry employment needs.

Enhancement of soft skills of students in online courses is the focus of the second workshop article. This article presents instructional methods that allow for the development of professional skills when using an online asynchronous teaching environment. As horticultural programs continue to expand, online teaching methods must also be developed to effectively prepare students for career success. The key to success is to have planned activities that answer specific learning outcomes.

The last article in the workshop that discusses career skills provides a detailed description of a successful college-wide plan that identified professional skill needs of students enrolled in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Arizona, Tucson. The article outlines methods used to enhance professional skill development in students without increasing credit hour requirements or time to degree. The career skills/competency-based approach presented in this article will provide graduates with an enhanced employment competitiveness.

The articles from this workshop highlight leading research and teaching practices that enhance educational content and improve student preparedness for employment needs of the horticultural industry. Moreover, these workshop articles describe teaching methods that directly address the employment needs of industry. The practices described in the presented articles can be implemented in both traditional face-to-face classes, as well as asynchronous distance-education based courses.

Literature cited

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This article was part of the workshop "Developing Soft Skills in Tomorrow's Leaders" held 10 Aug. 2016 at the ASHS Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA, and sponsored by the ASHS Teaching Methods Working Group.

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doi: 10.21273/HORTTECH03676-17