

# A PROFESSIONALISM CONUNDRUM: DEVELOPMENT OF BUSINESS STUDENTS' CAREER READINESS

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper, we explore how two colleges of business at public, teaching-focused universities in the southeast are addressing what we call a professionalism conundrum – the lack of key skills that employers expect business students to have upon graduation in addition to the discipline-specific or technical knowledge and skills they have developed. We include highlights from current research literature on this topic followed by our own examples of how our universities are addressing this challenge. We hope to facilitate a dialogue among conference attendees who have their own experiences with this conundrum and perhaps some insights to share.*

## INTRODUCTION

If one spends any time at all with a diverse group of academicians and/or employers, such as at a committee meeting or at a conference, inevitably the topic of student competence arises in some form. Over the past decade, we have observed how unprepared some of our students seem to be for the careers they are working so hard to achieve. While they have acquired the necessary discipline-specific or technical knowledge and skills, many students are sorely lacking when it comes to other skills that are essential to successful careers: collaboration, oral and written communication, interpersonal skills, and professionalism, among others. These career readiness competencies are the most valued by employers according to the *2019 Job Outlook* study conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2019 – see Appendix for NACE's eight competencies).

In this paper, we explore this conundrum from a few perspectives. After highlighting some academic research on this topic, we reflect on how the University of West Florida's College of Business addressed the problem through curricular requirements and partnerships both on and off campus. Next, we examine how the Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University used a professional development program and then a college committee to approach the problem systemically, but separately from curricular requirements. Lastly, at the conference, we will invite our peers to join us in sharing what has worked well for them so that all of us may make improvements in this important area.

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Student career readiness has been linked to soft skills and professionalism in academic literature (e.g., Amoroso & Burke, 2018), and numerous other business scholars have identified soft skills and professionalism as a target behavior to develop in students (Anthony & Garner, 2016; Clark, Amer, & Ng, 2014; Wesley, Jackson, & Lee, 2016). Within ABSEL, some of the components of soft skills and professionalism have been examined in recent years, such as career readiness (Nolan & Kurthakoti, 2018; Williams, Green, & Diel, 2017), collaboration (Hamada, Kaneko, & Hiji, 2018; Tokke & Meltzer, 2019), and interpersonal skills (Geddes, Cannon, & Cannon, 2018; Magnuson & Good, 2017).

The Professionalism Recognition Program (<https://nau.edu/franke/professional-development/prp/>) at Northern Arizona University incorporates the themes of collaborativeness, respectfulness, conscientiousness, integrity, appearance, responsibility, and effectiveness across coursework taught by participating faculty members where students can earn points, called props (Clark, Amer, & Ng, 2014). Students may also earn props through extracurricular activities, and the points are tracked by the information technology staff within the college of business (Clark, Amer, & Ng, 2014).

At Dominican University, a career management program emphasizing employable competencies, career search skills, industry knowledge, discipline mastery, and self awareness was implemented in three distinct phases in curriculum over a period of four years (Amoroso & Burke, 2018). During the first phase, students were offered a 2-credit hour elective course, and a series of career development workshops were offered (Amoroso & Burke). In the second phase, faculty embedded career development, through content, assignments, and activities, into 12 different required courses (Amoroso & Burke). For the final phase, Dominican University implemented an integrated career development program (<https://www.dom.edu/academics/aec/career-development>) that

included a 1-credit hour course and workshops that were required during each of the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years (Amoroso & Burke). The remainder of the paper will provide details of two business school programs that are similar to but distinct from the programs at Northern Arizona University and Dominican University.

## CURRICULUM AND PARTNERSHIPS

Around 2010, the dean of the college of business at the University of West Florida (UWF) pressed for stronger business communication skills after hearing from employers that graduates had substandard oral and written communication skills. Later, by the 2012-2013 academic year, it was time for a new quality enhancement plan (QEP) as part of the university's SACSCOC reaccreditation efforts. The entire faculty voted on communication as the focused improvement topic for the QEP. Consequently, rubrics for oral and written communication were developed for the entire university community as part of the necessary assessment and assurance of learning activities.

When the business dean decided to make stronger business communication a focus, the required business communication course (GEB3213) was no longer allowed to be transferred from another university. The hope was that by standardizing who taught the course and the learning objectives, the overall learning would be more consistent and effective. In that course, students have a variety of letter, memo, and email assignments that address how to relay their thoughts in writing in a way that is clear and easy to understand by the average reader. One of the more difficult parts for most students is to avoid academic language and sentence structure and get to the point clearly and concisely in a 10th grade readability range. The university approved QEP rubric is used to assess students on five outcomes:

1. Evidence to support purpose,
2. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation,
3. Organization of content,
4. Professional business language, and
5. Professional level of polish (basically, the format and appearance of the document).

Students are also given a topic to research (typically about common problems in the workplace and how to resolve them) and present their findings in a written memo report. Then they present their findings in a brief business presentation in front of the entire class.

The instructors of this course have collaborated with the university's Career Development and Community Engagement (CDCE) department routinely for over 10 years. For example, since Spring 2005, they have worked on an employment communication assignment which includes three parts: resume, cover letter, and interview follow-up thank you note. CDCE comes to the class and explains how to do the assignment. In addition, CDCE staff also grades and gives feedback on the assignment. Students can also get a review of their work from CDCE staff prior to turning in the assignment. During the past year, students set up Handshake accounts and submit the assignment through Handshake. Since Handshake is a real job board and their resumes are real, they are prepared for a real job search after the assignment ends. Cover letters from the assignment can be edited for each job a student applies for. The cover letter and thank you note are probably the most important parts of the assignment since most students come into GEB3213 with no knowledge of what they are or what information should go in them. Students frequently return to CDCE for help with a real job search. In addition to collaborating with the GEB3213 classes and instructors, CDCE now works with various classes and instructors across campus so that instructors must make reservations prior to the beginning of the semester. The demand for CDCE assistance has increased dramatically over the years, and its calendar is usually booked up at the beginning of each semester.

Around 2015, GEB3213 became a prerequisite to capstone courses in the various business programs because many students were waiting until the last year or even their last semester to take this mandatory course. Consequently, students often come into the class with no prior experience in giving professional business presentations. Some students have had speech classes (most often in high school rather than in college), but they are used to standing behind a podium and reading from a paper. The business presentation is much different and requires more audience engagement. The majority of students have expressed extreme anxiety in having to speak in front of a group of people, some to the point that they would prefer to receive a zero rather than do the assignment. The lack of eye contact and body language usually betray a student's nervousness; and in the business environment, that nervousness can affect an individual's or company's credibility. Maintaining eye contact does not come natural to humans, however, because during prehistoric times, being watched was dangerous—basically, predators were scoping you out to eat you (Gershman, 2019). Humans still have this basic primal fear about being watched, so making eye contact is something that has to be and can be taught to students. According to Gershman (2019), focusing on the topic of the speech itself is a mistake and will increase nervousness. A better way to begin a presentation is to focus on the audience: "Why are they there? What do they need?" It takes practice to refocus the brain onto the audiences' needs, but over time, the brain adapts and nervousness decreases (Gershman, 2019). Therefore, students need a place to practice before they do an assigned presentation. Funded by a QEP grant, the university's Oral Communications Lab began in the Fall 2019 semester. Oral communications is part of the university's QEP assessment, and the university has a QEP rubric for grading oral presentations. The rubric is used to assess students on four outcomes: sources, delivery (which includes body language and eye contact), language, and content. College of business grad students are trained to evaluate students using the QEP oral communications rubric. Allowing students multiple opportunities to practice business presentations not only prepares them for their speaking assignments, but it also trains them to become more professional speakers in their careers.

Another way UWF uses partnerships to help business students with career readiness is through the Executive Mentor

Program, which began around 2013. Local business executives partner with student mentees to meet once per month to provide coaching, career advice, and networking opportunities, among other goals. The monthly meetings may consist of lunch, coffee, in-office meeting, or a virtual meeting. Mentors must have 10+ years of business and professional experience, and they must commit to spending 1-2 hours per month with their mentees. Student participation in this program is competitive with requirements ranging from a 3.0 GPA and full-time student status to having 12 months or more left in their degree program and completing an interview process. This program has a full-time director and office administrator, and the office hosts events throughout the academic year to facilitate interactions between mentors and mentees while also providing focused professional development. A collection of video testimonials from mentors and mentees demonstrates how popular and successful this program has been: <https://uwf.edu/cob/community-outreach/executive-mentor-program/>

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ASSURANCE OF LEARNING

At the Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), the management and marketing departments decided to start hosting professional development workshops on topics like resume writing and interviewing because the faculty and hiring managers saw a deficiency in student preparation for the job search. Faculty would require or incentivize their students to attend these events. The facilitators of these events were faculty with professional experience and/or business partners/alumni from the community. By 2016, these workshops were officially launched as the IGNITE Professional Development Program with topics ranging from creating resumes to networking through LinkedIn and with programming spanning all of the business majors. The career fairs and other career-related events on campus are included in the program. While any student may attend the events, only business students are eligible for the official program plaque and recognition that comes after earning 100 points (or the equivalent of 10 regular events). Most of the workshops are now facilitated by business partners in the community.

During the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 2095 seats filled by students across 60 different IGNITE events. As of Fall 2019, there are 426 students enrolled in the official program, and 34 events were scheduled for the semester. There are 31 events on the Spring 2020 schedule, and the events are offered on various days and at various times of day. The schedule for a given semester is shared a few weeks before the semester starts so that every business professor may include it in course syllabi. Table 1 shows some examples of events and how this schedule is presented to students with the date, time, a description, which includes the presenter’s name and the points value for students in the official program, and the building/room number.

**TABLE 1**  
**Example of IGNITE event schedule**

Thurs 11/7	4:30-5:45 pm	“Straight Talk: Ask the Employers.” Candid exchange between area employers and students. This fact-finding/networking event will be driven by student questions via faculty facilitators. Hosted by Jane Doe. (Career Development, 10 points)	BAS S316
Tues 11/12	3:00-4:00 pm	Well-Being at Work. Learn how our brains are biased to give us inaccurate information about what is good for us and how that impacts our work. Discussion includes how to manage the many stimuli in work settings in a healthy way. Presented by John Doe. (Workshop, 10 points)	BAS S332
Wed 11/13	4:30-5:30 pm	Understanding Credit – Know Your Score. Understanding the basics of what goes into calculating your credit score, why that is important, and how to boost your score. Led by First ABC Bank representative, Jane Doe. Reservation required*. (Workshop, 10 points).	BAS S334
Thurs 11/14	11:30 am- 12:30 pm	Overcoming Challenges in Small Business Ownership. John Doe, small business owner and instructor in the Department of Management, provides an overview of challenges that new entrepreneurs face and ways to overcome them. (Workshop, 10 points)	BAS S332

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the Jones College of Business launched a small task force of senior faculty out of the undergraduate programs committee. Their purpose was to address the lack of professionalism behaviors faculty were seeing across various courses, such as lateness, academic misconduct, and communication. That summer, they created the professionalism initiative, which launched in Fall 2018. A working definition of professionalism was established, and the statement has been posted on the wall in every classroom (See Appendix B). Additionally, faculty are asked to add the statement to their course syllabi. The statement is:

The Jones College of Business is a professional school. In the Jones College of Business, students will demonstrate professionalism, which includes these behaviors:

- A solid work ethic demonstrated by preparation, punctuality, participation, and productivity;
- Respectful and courteous interaction with others;
- Ethical conduct; and

- Professional deportment highlighted by business-appropriate dress, diction, and demeanor.

In 2019-2020, the Assurance of Learning Committee is reviewing the professionalism initiative and the IGNITE program to determine if and how those activities may be incorporated into assessment activities as part of the assurance of learning requirements for AACSB accreditation. Certain learning outcomes are aligned with these programs, and measuring their impact should be valuable to students, employers, and the university.

## INSIGHTS AND THE FUTURE

Thus far, the paper has described what the colleges of business at UWF and MTSU are doing to address the professionalism conundrum. The remainder of the paper shares our own personal insights as faculty who encounter the lack of professionalism on a regular basis and who have been directly involved in our universities' efforts to address this challenge. We also describe our plan for facilitating an interactive discussion at the end of our presentation at the conference to learn what others are doing on this front.

Getting students to complete career-readiness activities that are outside of class and do not count toward a grade is futile based on our personal experiences. Even though we know they desperately need it, most students will not participate without some sort of incentive(s). Extra credit works for many students, but requiring attendance at a certain number of events to earn points (or to avoid losing them) may be the only thing that works for some students. Recognizing that attendance does not equate to learning, a reflection component or some other form of assessment should be considered to ensure that students actually pay attention and take advantage of the learning opportunity.

Collaborating with local businesses and bringing these business leaders to the campus can also be a strategy for encouraging students to be more professional. When jobs or internships are at stake, students are more inclined to dress professionally and make sure their resumes are polished and free of errors. Business leaders can also reinforce what the instructors have taught students about professional and ethical behavior and appearance. Bringing the business world to the university should serve as a reminder to students that getting the job they want is really their ultimate goal, not just achieving a certain GPA.

Additionally, students should begin to learn how to demonstrate professionalism – precisely what it is and how to be professional – long before their junior or senior year of college. Ideally, professionalism should be taught as early as elementary school; unfortunately, that ideal is beyond a university's control. The university can, however, begin teaching professionalism to incoming freshmen rather than waiting until the students are closer to graduation. A solid work ethic, respectful and courteous interaction with others, ethical conduct, and professional deportment will be necessary for all college graduates, not just the business students. Ultimately, every college graduate is going to end up as part of the workforce. If students are immersed in activities and assignments geared toward demonstrating professionalism from the beginning, then it can become second nature to them by the time they graduate and enter the workforce.

Some other ideas that have arisen as part of committee work are using 0-credit hour courses to require students to engage in a certain number of professional development activities. In the era of performance-based funding, where everyone gets penalized when students complete excess hours, this approach may be a good option to formalize efforts to improve professionalism and career readiness. Some universities use these types of courses for required internships and similar required experiences.

At the conference, around half of our session will be spent engaging the audience on this topic. We will use an electronic surveying tool, such as Kahoot, Survey Monkey, etc., to poll the audience in real time. The questions and results will be used to facilitate a discussion. We will download the feedback and share it with attendees who input their email addresses. This interactive learning strategy will help everyone in attendance get more value from the session than just hearing from the authors.

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## APPENDIX A

Quoted from NACEweb.org (<https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>):

### DEFINITION OF CAREER READINESS AND COMPETENCIES

*CAREER READINESS IS THE ATTAINMENT AND DEMONSTRATION OF REQUISITE COMPETENCIES THAT BROADLY PREPARE COLLEGE GRADUATES FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION INTO THE WORKPLACE.*

These competencies are:

**Critical Thinking/Problem Solving:** Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual is able to obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process, and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness.

**Oral/Written Communications:** Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The individual has public speaking skills; is able to express ideas to others; and can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively.

**Teamwork/Collaboration:** Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints. The individual is able to work within a team structure, and can negotiate and manage conflict.

**Digital Technology:** Leverage existing digital technologies ethically and efficiently to solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals. The individual demonstrates effective adaptability to new and emerging technologies.

**Leadership:** Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others. The individual is able to assess and manage his/her emotions and those of others; use empathetic skills to guide and motivate; and organize, prioritize, and delegate work.

**Professionalism/Work Ethic:** Demonstrate personal accountability and effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image. The individual demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind, and is able to learn from his/her mistakes.

**Career Management:** Identify and articulate one's skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and career goals, and identify areas necessary for professional growth. The individual is able to navigate and explore job options, understands and can take the steps necessary to pursue opportunities, and understands how to self-advocate for opportunities in the workplace.

**Global/Intercultural Fluency:** Value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. The individual demonstrates, openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences.

## APPENDIX B

The Jones College of Business's commitment to professionalism is demonstrated by posting of this signage in every classroom (<https://www.mtsu.edu/cbaoli/Professionalism.php>):

# JONES COLLEGE OF BUSINESS IS A PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

## Students Will Demonstrate Professionalism

- **Solid Work Ethic**
  - Preparation
  - Punctuality
  - Participation
  - Productivity
- **Respectful and Courteous Interaction**
- **Ethical Conduct**
- **Business-Appropriate Behavior**
  - Dress
  - Diction
  - Demeanor