



# ADDRESSING THE SOFT SKILLS GAP BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

## UNDERSTANDING HOW HIGHER EDUCATION CAN TEACH THE SOFT SKILLS EMPLOYERS SEEK IN RECENT GRADUATES



### The Problem

Students aren't learning the vital soft skills, or human skills, needed to transition into the workforce and move up in organizations.

96%

of higher ed faculty report that students can benefit from extra career training and leadership development.<sup>1</sup>



### The Effect

The lack of soft skills development in higher education is causing a talent shortage in the job market and leaving students behind.

93%

of employers say soft skills play a critical role in their decision about whom they want to hire.<sup>2</sup>



### The Solution

Higher education institutions need to deliver real-world skills that set students up for success **through internship opportunities, leadership development, and experiential learning.**

95%

of students with an internship said that the internship prepared them for their career.<sup>1</sup>

## ARE COLLEGES DOING ENOUGH?

According to Forbes, 70 percent of new jobs since 2008 were in occupations that require a college degree.<sup>3</sup>



While college has proven to be indispensable for students looking to advance in their careers by teaching hard skills, our recent study, **The State of Higher Ed 2022**, found that students are lacking in a key area: soft skills.

Throughout this white paper, we will explore the widening gap between the soft skills employers seek and the skills taught at the college level. Our findings suggest that what students are learning in their regular course work does not always align with what hiring managers are looking for in an employee. Even though students go to college to set themselves up for career success, our research suggests this isn't always the outcome.

From our study, we conclude that students aren't developing three essential skills for the modern workplace: **communication, decision-making, and leadership.**

### THE STATE OF HIGHER ED 2022

The National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS) conducted a study to better understand if students are being prepared for the modern workplace. A total of **11,160** undergraduate students, graduate students, college graduates, and administrators answered questions to reveal this growing skills gap between college and employment.

### WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

Soft skills, or human skills, connect people and foster collaboration, such as communication, relationship building, and teamwork. These skills are vital in the modern workplace. In fact, according to LinkedIn's 2019 Global Talent Trends report, 89 percent of recruiters say that when a hire doesn't work out, it usually comes down to a lack of soft skills.<sup>4</sup>

## WHY ARE STUDENTS GOING TO COLLEGE?

Learning outcomes outweigh the college experience.

48%



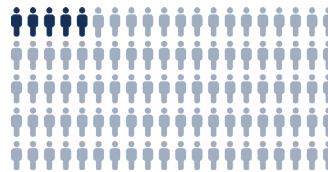
Learn Skills  
for Career

46%



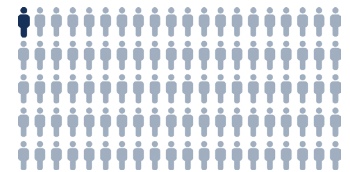
Get a Degree

5%



The College  
Experience

1%



Not Sure

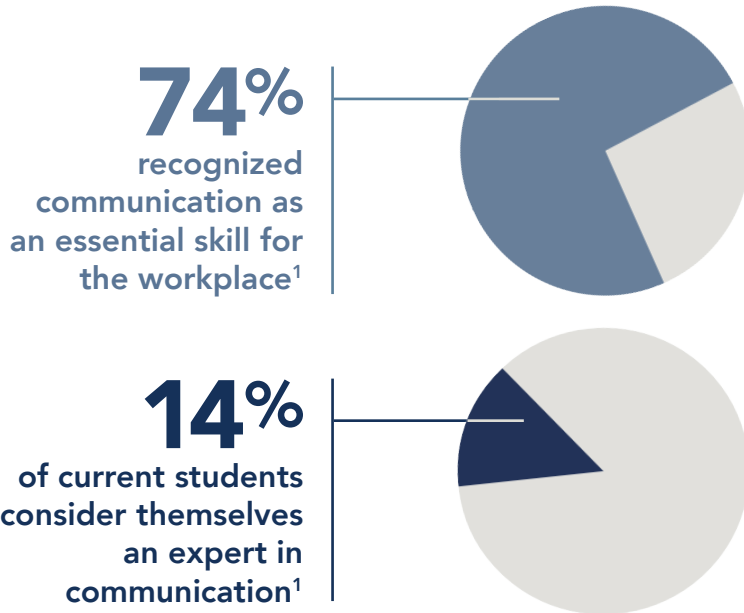
# SOFT SKILLS HIGHER ED NEEDS TO DEVELOP IN STUDENTS



**1** Communication that connects with others

Studies show there is a direct link between a thriving work environment and **effective communication**.<sup>5</sup> Communication plays a major role in positive and productive workplace cultures.

## THE GREAT COMMUNICATION DIVIDE



### Why This Matters

This highlights an important disparity; students are concerned with their communication skills but can still recognize its significance toward their future success.

According to our research, **less than half of students said that their communication skills have significantly improved while attending a higher education institution**.<sup>1</sup> Although colleges usually make a communication course mandatory, the data shows that there isn't enough time dedicated to that skill in relation to its importance in the workplace. Learning great communication is not a one-off course requirement; instead, it is a skill that needs to be developed over time through experiential learning, internships, and leadership development.

## ASSESSING THE IMPACT



## SOFT SKILLS HIGHER ED NEEDS TO DEVELOP IN STUDENTS



### 2 Decision-making that solves problems

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), problem solving is the top skill employers seek.

**86%**  
of employers say they want to see evidence of this skill on an applicant's resume.<sup>6</sup>

To solve problems, one has to be decisive even when it might be difficult. Employers want recent graduates to be able to come up with solutions to potential problems that will lead to positive outcomes.

However, similar to communication, a majority of graduates don't feel they have improved decision-making skills in college.

**17%**  
of current students rate themselves as expert decision makers<sup>1</sup>



**41%**  
of students reported significant improvement in this skill while attending a higher education institution.<sup>1</sup>

**68%**  
of students improved their decision-making skills through an internship<sup>1</sup>

This highlights the impact that real-world experiences, or situations mimicking what students can expect entering the workforce, has on one's future success. By focusing more on communication and decision-making skill-building within higher ed curriculums, colleges will help develop better job candidates and future leaders.

### ATTRIBUTES STUDENTS IMPROVED THROUGH AN INTERNSHIP<sup>1</sup>

COMMUNICATION



**80%**

DECISION MAKING



**68%**



# SOFT SKILLS HIGHER ED NEEDS TO DEVELOP IN STUDENTS



## 3 Leadership that creates change

Organizations around the world seek to identify and develop the leadership skills people need to handle tough situations and inspire their teams.

What are leadership skills? The NSLS Learner to Leader Framework focuses on the development of 48 competencies that lead to the mastery of eight core leadership pillars that build well-rounded, modern leaders. They can be broken down into smaller traits and competencies, but a true leader knows how to handle volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.<sup>7</sup>

Although there is an obvious need for leadership training, one of the main skills needed for employment, there isn't enough of a focus on leadership development during one's regular course work while earning a degree.

### ARE STUDENTS BECOMING FUTURE LEADERS?

We asked current students if they are learning leadership skills in their major's course work.<sup>1</sup>



Leadership skills cover many key traits, and educational institutions are not doing enough to help develop them in students, who will need them as they enter the job market. In addition to one's regular course work, students will benefit from leadership development and mentorship programs where they will see leadership in action.

### LEARNER TO LEADER FRAMEWORK: EIGHT KEY PILLARS

The NSLS focuses on developing the skills, habits, and attitudes needed to master eight key leadership pillars.



**Growth Mindset**



**Global Awareness**



**Innovation**



**Relationship Building**



**Personal Growth**



**Effective Communication**



**Professionalism**



**Digital Literacy**

## PRIORITIZING CAREER PREPAREDNESS

Ensuring students are **career ready** must become a priority for higher education institutions



There is an expectation that college should prepare students for the workforce, yet only 42.9 percent of graduates indicate that this is the case.<sup>1</sup> This **huge gap between preparedness and employment** is disconcerting, especially during a pandemic where social and soft skills for Gen Z plummeted.<sup>8</sup>



**51%**

of Gen Z respondents in a Workforce Institute study said they don't believe the educational system has helped prepare them for work.<sup>9</sup>



**54%**

of students agree or strongly agree that they feel worried about landing their ideal job.<sup>1</sup>



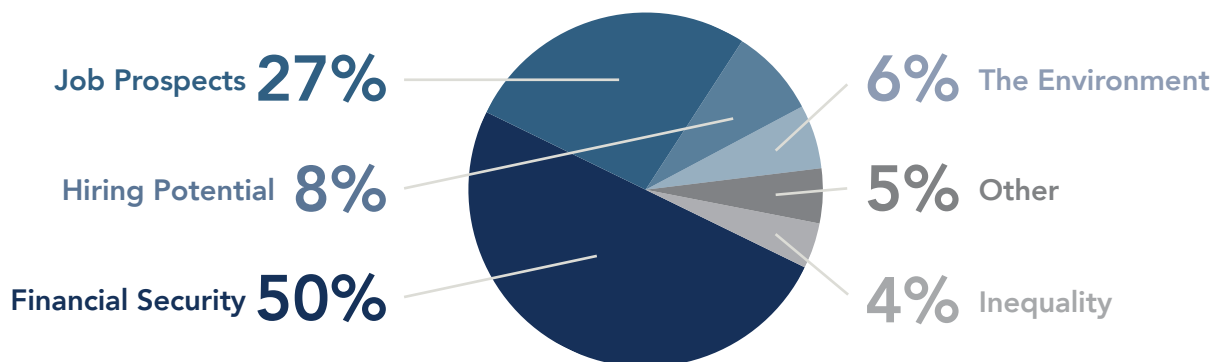
**81%**

of Gen Z say they are stressed about money, according to the American Psychological Association.<sup>10</sup>

Higher education needs to recognize the importance of preparing students for the modern workplace and offer more learning opportunities for students. This is especially true given that our study suggests the top three aspects students are most worried about post-graduation are financial security, job prospects, and hiring potential—much more so than other important issues they face.

### WHAT WORRIES STUDENTS AFTER GRADUATION

According to higher education administrators, career-related topics are a top concern for students as they transition out of school.



Students expect higher education institutions to provide the necessary skills to propel them forward into their careers, yet they are in need of more opportunities for career development.<sup>11</sup> Because of this, studies indicate a severe talent shortage, where hiring managers point out that many applicants lack the necessary skills needed for employment.<sup>12</sup>

## HOW HIGHER ED CAN BETTER PREPARE STUDENTS

While employers lose revenue, recent college graduates are faced with their own dilemma of being unprepared to enter the workforce



Our research demonstrates that career-focused education and real-world experiences, such as **internships and experiential learning models, played a crucial role in preparing students for the modern workforce.** By building upon the hard skills students learn in the classroom, higher education institutions can do more to develop the human skills needed for a more effective workplace, including communication, decision-making, and leadership.

The problem, however, is that students are not being exposed to these kinds of opportunities.

### DO STUDENTS HAVE INTERNSHIPS?

Internships are rare, further highlighting the need for colleges to emphasize experiential learning opportunities available to students.



# 17%

of students have had an internship<sup>1</sup>

Previous research has shown that students who had an internship were **15 percent less likely to be unemployed** in the years just following graduation.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, those with an internship **earned 6 percent more** than students who did not have an internship.<sup>14</sup> These types of hands-on experiences are invaluable to retain employment and increase earning potential.

## HOW HIGHER ED CAN BETTER PREPARE STUDENTS

Higher education institutions need to integrate more work-based opportunities before graduation.



### THE SOLUTION



#### INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Prioritize high-quality internships to help students learn workplace skills directly.

**95%**

of those with an internship said that the internship prepared them for their career.<sup>1</sup>



#### LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Incorporate career-minded development programming into students' regular course work.

**11%**

of HR leaders feel they have a strong talent pool that can take over leadership roles.<sup>15</sup>



#### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Emulate real-world situations that will build skills to help employers achieve their goals.

**80%**

of students saw improvement in their communication skills through an internship.<sup>1</sup>



# HOW HIGHER ED CAN BETTER PREPARE STUDENTS

Building a Future-Proof Education



By integrating work-based opportunities and programming for students in addition to their regular course work, there will be a smaller skills mismatch.<sup>16</sup>

To further highlight the importance of providing opportunities to develop human skills while in college, our study suggests that those students who held internships saw improvements to vital skills like decision-making.

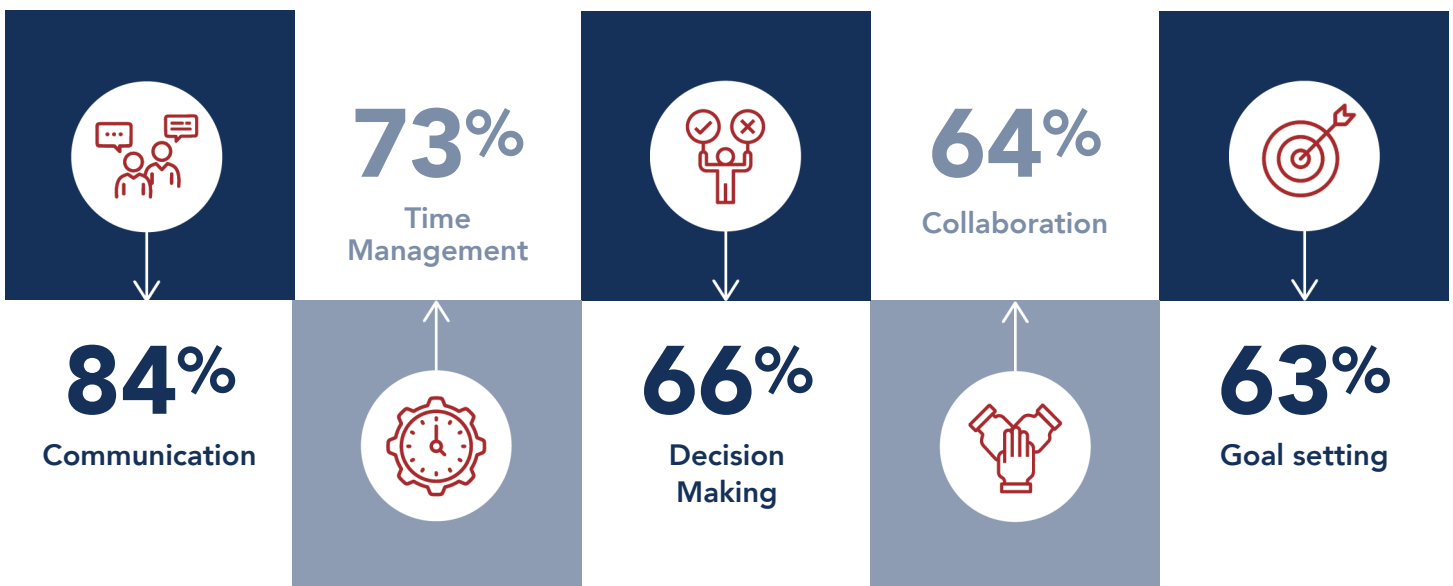
While 1,400 of those surveyed for the State of Higher Ed study responded that they had an internship, **95 percent responded that the internship prepared them for their career.**<sup>1</sup> Plus, of the 2,152 undergraduates who interviewed for a job, **68 percent were offered the position**, yet only **37.1 percent of them attribute that to interview prep** resources at their school.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, students who had an internship improved specific skills that both students and employers have determined are essential to succeed in the modern workplace, including communication, time management, decision-making, collaboration, and goal setting.<sup>1</sup>

**33%**

of respondents said their course work in school prepared them for an internship, further demonstrating the greater impact of experiential learning models.

## THE SKILLS STUDENTS DEVELOPED THROUGH AN INTERNSHIP



Internships are a great example of the kind of career-minded educational outlets students need to improve key skills for success, as well as to develop into leaders.



Conclusion:  
**BRIDGING THE DIVIDE**

In the NSLS State of Higher Ed study, we found that colleges have room for improvement in teaching the skills employers seek and in better preparing students for the modern workplace. So, how can the soft skills gap be addressed?

### IN-DEMAND SOFT SKILLS

Higher ed has to focus more on the skills students will need following graduation.



Communication



Decision-Making



Leadership

Through integrated real-world educational programs, strategic leadership development, and access to high-quality internships, students will be able to improve key human skills including communication, decision-making, and leadership. It's up to higher education administrators to bridge this gap and create a realistic road map for their students' futures. This is something on administrators' minds already.

### COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS ALMOST ALL AGREE: CAREER-FOCUSED EDUCATION WILL HELP STUDENTS.



**96%**

of higher ed faculty report that students benefit from extra career training and leadership development.

This further demonstrates the need for higher education institutions to incorporate some form of training and development beyond the current model. **By closing this divide, students will leave college with more relevant and applicable real-world skills, and both recent graduates and organizations will benefit from the result.**



## SOURCES:

1. (2022). The State of Higher Ed. The National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS).
2. (2022). The Class of 2022: The Job Market Outlook for Grads. ZipRecruiter.
3. Newton, D. (2021). "Even More Reasons You Should Get a College Degree." Forbes.
4. (2019) 2019 Global Talent Trends. LinkedIn. Retrieved from SHRM.
5. Cui, Y. (2021). 'The role of emotional intelligence in workplace transparency and open communication.' Aggression and Violent Behavior.
6. Gray, K. (2021). 'Problem-Solving Skills Top Attributes Employers Seek on Resumes.' National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).
7. Iordanoglou, D. (2018). 'Future Trends in Leadership Development Practices and the Crucial Leadership Skills.' Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics.
8. (2022). Spring 2022 Back-to-School Survey to Assess Mental Health and Emotional Concerns Regarding COVID-19. TimelyMD.
9. (2019). Generation Z in the Workplace. Workforce Institute. Retrieved from The Science of Leadership at the NSLS.
10. (2018). Stress in America™: Generation Z. American Psychological Association.
11. Sublett, C., & Tovar, J. (2021). Community College Career and Technical Education and Labor Market Projections: A National Study of Alignment. Community College Review.
12. Pang, E., Wong, M., Leung, C. H., & Coombes, J. (2019). 'Competencies for fresh graduates' success at work: Perspectives of employers.' Industry and Higher Education.
13. Silva, P., Lopes, B., Costa, M. et al. (2016). 'Stairway to employment? Internships in higher education.' Higher Education. Retrieved from The Conversation.
14. Saniter, N., Siedler, T. (2014). 'Door Opener or Waste of Time? The Effects of Student Internships on Labor Market Outcomes.' IZA Discussion Paper. Retrieved from The Conversation.
15. (2021). Global Leadership Forecast. DDI. Retrieved from Apollo Technical.
16. Succi, C., Canovi, M. (2020). 'Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: comparing students and employers' perceptions.' Studies in Higher Education.