

How to Find College Courses That Teach Soft Skills

Experts say work ethic alone isn't enough, as employers are looking for candidates with a range of interpersonal skills.



According to HR professionals, teamwork and communication skills are among those that employers value highly. (GETTY IMAGES)

THOUGH [college](#) students develop a depth of knowledge in their chosen discipline, it's often soft skills that will help them land a job.

3 Soft Skills for College Success

Soft skills are attributes that govern how an employee interacts with others in the workplace. Separate from technical skills, these characteristics are more about navigating the world of work than the actual hands-on part of having a job.

"As our workforce has become more diversified, there's been a need to be more adaptable, to be able to change to the environment and change to technology. These skills perhaps have become all the more important for employers," says Wendy Hilton-Morrow, who serves as vice president of academic affairs, provost and dean, and a communications studies professor at [Augustana College](#) in Illinois.

"They need students more than ever who don't just have disciplinary depth, but who will be able to change as the information we have changes, or the technology we're using changes, because that's something we're certainly seeing more of," she says.

Hard skills – the abilities students learn in college to take into a job – are important, but 92% of human resources professionals say that soft skills matter as much or more, according to 5,000-plus survey responses in the LinkedIn Global Talent Trends 2019 report.

[Hone the Top 8 Soft Skills Every College Student Needs.](#)

In interviews with higher education and HR professionals, these soft skills emerged as essential to employers:

- Leadership.
- Teamwork.
- Communication skills.
- Conflict resolution.
- Problem-solving.
- Flexibility and adaptability.
- Social and emotional intelligence.
- Time management.

According to experts, colleges have focused more on developing soft skills in recent years because of the emphasis from employers.

"Those who hire have noticed a lack of people being able to get along and work harmoniously together, leave their ego at the door and seek a common purpose," says Kina S. Mallard, president of Georgia's [Reinhardt University](#). "That's why we're talking about soft skills a lot more."

She notes that a seminar for first-year students at Reinhardt teaches those skills early, focusing on issues such as professional communication. Students learn how to email and text – which they've already been doing for years – in a professional manner.

Soft skills are especially important in a tight labor market where companies compete for talent. The U.S. Department of Labor reported a national unemployment rate of 3.8% for March, meaning workers are in high demand.

Employers are looking for individuals who can come in, **listen, learn and be part of a team**, says Jeremy Tolley, chief people officer of CareHere LLC, a national medical services company based in Tennessee, and an adviser for the Society for Human Resource Management.

"The workplace is all about we and us, and what we're achieving together," Tolley says.

Students can develop those desired soft skills both in and out of the classroom, experts say.

A communications class is one example of a course that teaches soft skills, Hilton-Morrow says. But students can also learn these skills through any class that emphasizes problem-based learning, she says.

Using an anatomy class as an example, Hilton-Morrow suggests that any time students are required to work together to solve a problem, they are learning to delegate and deal with potential conflicts. She believes that students learn soft skills when they are pushed out of their boundaries and forced to overcome challenges.

She notes that for many students, answers have only been "a click away," so it's important they challenge themselves early in their academic career. By stepping out of their comfort zone, she feels that students will learn more about themselves and their skill set.

Mallard says that in addition to communications classes, theater classes can be a good way to learn to see different perspectives by becoming someone

else through a character. Generally, she says, any class where students are required to work with classmates or the public will sharpen their soft skills.

Tolley adds that a public speaking class is also crucial for developing necessary communications skills for the workplace.

Experts also emphasize the importance of experiences out of the classroom, such as volunteering, taking part in student organizations, [study abroad programs](#) and [internships](#). They note that such experiences expose students to different people and cultures, preparing them for a diverse workplace where they will be required to communicate with co-workers likely coming from different backgrounds.

Tolley has some simple advice for students in high school or college who want to learn soft skills: "[Get a job](#)." Even a job in the service industry, which Tolley notes is much maligned, can help students develop soft skills early.

"The people who have had prior employment – even if that's working in high school at a part-time job – those people tend to have gained more soft skills, just through the hard knocks of having a job and having experiences. And I think the same holds true for those who have had internships, those who have had to work collaboratively with other people," Tolley says.

When applying for an internship or job, Tolley says it may be better to showcase soft skills in an interview rather than on a [resume](#). He adds that listing the experiences they've had – in and out of the classroom – will prompt interviewers to ask about what the student learned, thus opening the door to explain how those formative opportunities have developed the attributes employers desire.

Experts say the more opportunities students have to build soft skills, the better they can emphasize those in a job interview.

"I think the more that they can take advantage of experiential learning opportunities, the easier it will be for them to highlight and talk about the skills that they gained," Hilton-Morrow says.