

Next Generation Career Competencies via Interdisciplinary Professional Projects

Essential to any educational process is to clarify “learning objectives”. Typically objectives are defined by educational institutions, based on established discipline areas. Academic disciplines have traditionally been segregated to promote focused study, with standardized curricula. Scholars are expected to select a discipline and join others in the same focus area to share inquiry, challenge hypotheses, perform research and application to develop understanding and pursue ongoing issues in their field. Learning outcomes are measured and typically “validated” by the same institution that has designed the course standards and processes. Teachers are qualified by even deeper and more extensive years of study, research and publication which establishes authority in the discipline. Within universities, departments are similarly segregated, and often it has been difficult for programs to flexibly offer cross-disciplinary coursework. In this way, education has been a relatively cyclical, compartmentalized, self-contained process.

Meanwhile, the “real-world” is a changing dynamic of interactive systems and disciplines, mutually influencing unpredictable new challenges, requiring “interdisciplinary” problem solving. Beyond the classroom, students must be prepared to add value in the context of commercial, government and/or non-profit organizations, which are typically struggling to manage diverse employees with limited resources, in a competitive race, to achieve practical and financial goals. The value of education in this context is measured not just by the “grades” students achieve, but by their “ROI” (return on investment) in terms of position, wages, and lifestyle afforded by job placement. Employers ultimately measure the value of the education in terms of relevance and adaptability to the workplace project at hand. Further, employers are looking for a variety of competencies that may not be taught in the classroom.

Ultimately 21st century workforce “learning objectives” must be defined by multiple stakeholders, including students, employers, educational funding agencies (which may include parents!), as well as educational institutions. Because consumer market forces are driving the adaptive strategies of organizations, the surrounding community is also a vital stakeholder in measuring value. Given our contemporary global issues of increasing populations, climate change, water and food insecurity, necessary transitions to alternative energy, all impacting redesigns for products, services and work systems, our next generation leaders must be prepared to grapple with problems through “multi-focus” perspectives. Their **training must include hands on projects that require working with teammates who may not be of the same discipline**, as each brings vital insight to address complex issues and operationalize solutions. Communications skills must be learned, so that the language of science may be “translated” to provide meaningful insights, while working in cooperation with a business, policy or local community member. Similarly the varied objectives, language[s] and culture[s] of business, government and communities, may inform practical team-based solution building. This collaboration is not easy as we observe increasingly conflicted arguments among politicians, businesses, age groups, cultures and affiliations as we engage in questions of changes for the 21st century society! At the core, cross disciplinary inquiry and dialogue is at least one essential learning objective for next generation leadership, that challenges our standard curriculum for education and corporations alike.

Recognizing the challenge, educational institutions are increasingly building in the “experiential learning” component to challenge students to work in groups and/or take theory to practice beyond the classroom. Students may be required to pursue an internship or project in the community to build

their skills, expand their resume, and possibly cultivate a professional network. However, this can be difficult for students to achieve in a competitive job landscape. They may expect it to be provided by the school, while schools expect students to manage this aspect on their own.

Career Services within educational institutions can be essential partners in helping students find internships. However, in-house services are often segregated from workplace networks just as the students and faculty may be. While career coaches may work with students on basics of resume, cover letters and interview practice, it may not be enough to bridge the “campus to careers” divide. New interdisciplinary partnerships between stakeholders in next generation workforce must be cultivated to achieve win/win/wins. Bridge programs within organizations, associations and external agencies offer a valuable opportunity.

A well-known model is “cooperative education” which offers a 3-way learning contract between a workplace project host, schools and students.

- 1) **Organizations receive help on projects** from a ‘consulting team’. Supervisors define the mission, framework, resources and required deliverables, with performance standards.
- 2) **Projects may be evaluated by academics** to ensure a level of theory-to-practice that may be worthy of academic credit, with additional requirements.
- 3) **Students learn through professional practice, with interdisciplinary teams**, build their resumes, networks, and opportunities for employment.

This is also known as “[Action Learning Project](#)” in Executive MBA Programs , or [Career Practicum](#) as is applied currently at World Learning/ SIT Graduate Institute and many other schools. In government, “co-op” has been known as [SCEP](#) (Student Career Experience Program), but recently transitioning to “[Pathways](#)” Program. Associations such as [WACE/CEIA](#) bring together stakeholders to continually develop new insights for programs and methods of evaluation.

Chesapeake Career Consulting applies these principles of cooperation with candidates from varied disciplines in the DC Metro Region to support competency development required for the changing job market. Interdisciplinary Career Coaching/ Educational Consulting services are delivered in a variety of ways, including individualized and group career coaching, teambuilding workshops, online seminars with professional panels on current issues, guidance in locating and cultivating project opportunities, or supporting organizations in next generation leadership program development as may be relevant. “Career Strategy Projects” are integral to individual development plans, aligned with student-defined career objectives, while building vital networks with professionals in associations and businesses. At Robert H. Smith School of Business, MBA students have contributed insights across sectors, in roles focused on strategy consulting, corporate social responsibility, supply chain logistics, international capacity building through microfinance, alternative energy and technology innovation, as well as venture capital, global markets and entrepreneurship. It is understood that our MBA’s are also becoming hiring managers in the region!

Currently at World Learning/ SIT Graduate Institute in Washington DC, candidates are pursuing roles that reach beyond the NGO sector to join global business teams, consulting groups and public-private partnerships to support social responsibility and sustainable system solutions. *Thinking forward*, we hope to cultivate regional professional community networks that may involve MBA’s, international students across universities in the DC/Metro region to foster mentoring partnerships as well as helping each other navigate the 21st century job market.