There is an old cartoon that many may remember from their childhood. It featured a man who found a magical singing frog. Convinced that the frog will make him a fortune, the man carries the frog from place to place to try to secure a theatrical agent and even rents a theatre to let the world see his discovery. When they are alone, the frog belts out classic tunes like “Hello! Ma Baby” or “The Michigan Rag.” But each time the spotlight is on the frog, he can only manage a tentative “ribbit!”

Working with college students can sometimes feel the same way. In day-to-day interactions, educators can see students developing and displaying the skills that employers want. And yet, employers and even the students themselves do not always see what we are seeing. Consequently, when students interview for their first job after college, educators know that they are prepared to confidently sing their song. But at that moment, when everything is on the line, they sometimes choke—or perhaps we should say, they croak.

Many alarming reports and anecdotal evidence shared by employers indicate a skills gap between where college students are and where employers want them to be. A recent study found that only 11 percent of business leaders and 14 percent of the general public felt strongly that students graduated from college with the skills that are needed for success in the workplace (Lumina, 2013). What do employers feel students are missing? When asked, employers overwhelmingly say, “Soft skills.” Duckworth and Yeager (2015) defined these as “personal qualities other than cognitive ability that determine success” (p. 239). Mackes (2017) writes that, “college students entering the job market often find it challenging to demonstrate their soft skills on applications and résumés and in interviews. Yet it is the acquisition and application of these soft skills that can make all the difference for success in the workplace” (p. 4-5).

Last year, we contributed to a book published by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) titled Engagement and Employability: Integrating career learning through cocurricular experiences in postsecondary education. The book was a collaborative effort between six professional associations in higher education. NACE was a key partner in this initiative, along with NASPA, the Association of College Unions International, the National Association for Campus Activities, the Association of Fraternity and Sorority Advisors, and the National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association.

The premise of the book was that cocurricular experiences (such as participation in student organizations, service learning programs, or recreational sports) could play a significant role in helping students develop the qualities that employers are looking for. As a basis for determining these skills, we relied upon research conducted annually by NACE that measures what skills and attributes employers are looking for when they hire new college graduates. Mackes (2017) reports that, “More than 70 percent of employers have consistently identified leadership, teamwork, written communication ability, problem solving, and work ethic as key résumé attributes. Teamwork, verbal communication skills, and problem solving are the skills employers consider important for success” (p. 8). Kruger and Peck (2017) write, “The alignment between these skills and the kinds of learning outcomes already pursued in student affairs is clear. The data are compelling and suggest that a myriad of experiences are embedded in cocurricular learning that can help develop (these) skills” (xii-xiv).
The purpose of the book was to inspire student affairs educators to consider how their programs align with employment outcomes. Along with our co-authors, we made a strong case for the potential of this approach to help our many stakeholders understand us better. We showed data that demonstrated that students gain these skills from their cocurricular experiences, and experts from a wide variety of disciplines discussed how what we do might be adapted to improve our ability to teach these important skills.

From what we can tell, administrators in higher education have gotten the message. Seeing the value in our approach, NASPA invested in sending a copy of the book to its more than 1,200 voting delegates (usually the chief student affairs officer of the institution) free of charge. Additionally, many schools have been finding exciting and innovative ways to apply the lessons of the book. These lessons include that educators must not only find ways for students to gain the skills employers desire, but also that they help students articulate these skills to others. Kansas State University has developed a new program called “K-State 360,” which is designed to give students a “competitive edge for future success” (K-State 360, 2017, para. 6). Students learn about a variety of experiences that can help them gain career competencies and track their participation in these experiences; they can compete against their friends to see who earns the most points. These points can be redeemed for discounts on a variety of products and services provided by campus partners (K-State 360, 2017). Another approach—“Scarlet Seals of Excellence”—was taken by the University of Houston. Through this effort, students can submit materials to demonstrate their competency in the skills of diversity, leadership, personal development, critical thinking, and communication. Students who complete all four of these “seals” receive an honor chord for graduation (Scarlet Seals of Excellence, 2017).

Higher education is steeped in tradition, and can therefore often be resistant to change. However, it is critical that we let employers know that we have heard them, that we understand their needs, and that we are both invested and investing in solutions to close the skills gap. And while curricular change may be slow, learning outcomes in cocurricular experiences can be more fluid and responsive. There is an often-shared, anonymous quote that is popular among college educators that says, “It is easier to change the course of history than it is to change a history course.” To accomplish large-scale, substantial change, colleges and universities would need to adopt broad curricular change or encourage change in a huge number of independently managed academic programs. By comparison, colleges and universities usually offer a wide variety of cocurricular experiences that are typically managed by a relatively small number of professionals. Creating an intentional focus on developing career competencies through these experiences is often easier. This is especially true since, while results are unquestionably improved with the intervention of a skilled educator with clearly identified goals and learning outcomes, many of the skills employers desire are naturally enhanced by the students’ involvement and participation in them.

For this reason, as institutions of higher education seek to focus on developing the skills employers demand, they would be wise to seek a three-phase solution. The first phase involves helping employers find the individuals most likely to already possess these skills: namely, involved students and student leaders. The second phase is to improve the quality of learning outcomes that result from these experiences, and to increase consistency across experiences. The third and final phase is to increase the number of our students who are participating in cocurricular experiences so we can increase our capacity and widen our impact. According data from the 2015 Project CEO Benchmarking Study, about 66 percent of the respondents participated in student organizations at least one hour per week (Campus Labs, 2015). This last phase will be harder to accomplish, but even slow incremental growth can make a big difference.

The remainder of this article will focus on the first phase articulated above: helping employers find students with the skills they desire. The effectiveness of higher education is often more likely to be judged by stories than data. In this way, stories of college graduates who demonstrate their lack of readiness to be successful in their first job often spread far and wide and support a common narrative of the ineffectiveness of colleges and universities to prepare them. Those business leaders who seek to attract the best employees would be wise to seek out those who have already differentiated themselves among their peers: involved students and student leaders.

THE ENGAGED STUDENT

Many underestimate the value of learning outside of the classroom. Benjamin and Hamrick bemoan that, “student affairs professionals are still met with skepticism or indifference when discussing their contributions to student learning” (p. 24). In his book Making the Most of College, Richard Light (2001) reported on a study he conducted of Harvard students that challenged his perceptions about how learning occurs in college. He wrote: “I assumed the most important and memorable academic learning goes on inside the classroom, while outside activities provide a useful but modest supplement. The evidence shows the opposite is true: learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital. When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside the classroom” (p. 8).

It is safe to assume that students who are engaged in experiences outside of the classroom are developing different skills than those who do not participate, and developing these skills more deeply as well.
In 2014, Gallup published the *Great Jobs, Great Lives* report, which underscores the importance of student engagement in college. The study looked at the “well-being” of individuals throughout their lives. This concept was divided among five different dimensions: purpose, social well-being, financial well-being, community well-being, and physical well-being. Purpose was defined as “liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals” (p. 2). Social well-being was defined as “having strong and supportive relationships” (p. 2). Financial well-being was defined as “effectively managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security” (p. 2). Community well-being was defined as “the sense of engagement you have with the areas where you live, liking where you live, feeling safe, and having pride in your community” (p. 2). Finally, physical well-being was defined as “having good health and enough energy to get things done on a daily basis” (p. 2).

The research found that only 14 percent of the 30,000 people (of all ages) studied were thriving in all five dimensions and 29 percent were thriving in none of them. Think about that second number for a moment: Is there a better indication of our nation’s challenges than what is represented in this statistic? To a certain extent, nearly one-third of all people participating in the study were financially vulnerable, did not feel a sense of purpose in their work, lacked supportive relationships, felt unhealthy, and were unhappy in the communities where they live. It would make sense that these individuals don’t make very good employees. College graduates were more likely than non-graduates to be thriving in all five elements. What’s more, the research found that “where graduates went to college—public or private, small or large, very selective or not selective—hardly matters at all to their current well-being and their work lives” (Gallup, 2014, p. 4). In short, if you want to hire happy and healthy people, college graduates are a good place to start.

**PLANNING COMPLEX PROJECTS**

College offers many opportunities to put the skill of planning complex projects into practice. From managing multiple papers, exams, and projects in different classes to working toward common goals in a student organization or other cocurricular experience, it is clear that this learning outcome is salient to students. Across the board, the students in the Project CEO Benchmarking Study rated their abilities in this area higher than any of the other skills we studied. Only 2 percent of participants indicated that they had not developed this skill, and nearly one-fifth rated their skill in this area as being at the expert level.

Clearly, while most students have the opportunity to develop this skill during college, student leaders are more likely to feel they have this skill than their peers who are not involved. The mean score for students who were very involved in multiple organizations was 0.44 points higher than students who indicated they were not involved at all. This makes intuitive sense. Organizing complex projects is an essential part of most cocurricular experiences. Whether their groups plan events, work toward advancing an important cause, or simply ensure that the members of the group have an entertaining and fun year, these experiences require a surprising amount of coordination. According to Peck et. al (2015), to achieve their ends, students must learn to practice a variety of skills, including time management, risk assessment, budgeting, and volunteer management, and also must balance the demands of their involvement with other responsibilities such as school work, employment, and family commitments. It makes intuitive sense that involved students would be well-prepared to manage complex projects after college, and our data support this conclusion.

**SELLING AND INFLUENCING**

In contrast to the ability to plan complex projects, students rate their ability to sell to or influence others lower than they rate their ability in any other skill. This finding is often perplexing to those of us who work with college student leaders on a daily basis. John C. Maxwell (2007) wrote that “leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less” (p. xviii-xix). Student leaders engage in a lot of leadership experiences, and therefore practice influencing others. Perhaps it is the word “selling” that is the problem. Certainly, some students do sell actual things as part of their leadership experience, but for those who don’t, the term “selling” may be throwing them off. In the 2015 Project CEO Benchmarking Study, more than one in five students (22 percent) indicated that they had not developed the skill of selling and influencing others while in college. Student leaders, however, felt strongly that they had developed skills in this area. The mean score for students who were very involved in multiple organizations was 0.81 points higher than students who indicated they were not involved at
all. What is also heartening is that in the 2016 iteration of the benchmarking study, there was significant improvement in how often students rated themselves as “competent” (up 9.3 percent from the 2015 study), “advanced” (up 20.9 percent), or “expert” (up 6 percent). Because the majority of schools that participated in the 2015 study also participated in 2016, there is reason to believe that schools may have developed initiatives to improve both students' awareness and proficiency in this very desirable skill.

DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

It makes sense that college would teach students the ability to make decisions and solve problems. In the 2015 Project CEO Benchmarking Study, only 2 percent of students indicated that they had not developed the skills of decision making or problem solving. However, even some in academia have questions as to how well college impacts students' critical thinking skills. In Academically Adrift, authors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011) found that greater than one-third of college seniors had made no statistically significant gains in critical thinking skills, and that even among those who did see improvements, these gains were modest. The authors did not evaluate which characteristics were present in the two-thirds of the students who did see gains as opposed to those who did not, but it is reasonable to conclude that engagement plays an important role. Kuh (2008) writes “engagement increases the odds that any student—educational and social background notwithstanding—will attain his or her educational and personal objectives, acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century, and enjoy the intellectual and monetary gains associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree” (p. 22). A number of conditions increase the chances that students will engage with their institutions. Referred to as high-impact experiences, Kuh notes that “these practices typically demand that students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks; most require daily decisions that deepen students’ investment in the activity” (p. 14). While cocurricular programs are not listed among Kuh's high-impact experiences, he does note that these opportunities have the potential to produce the same outcomes as the other programs he studied, writing, “Certainly students can do other things during college that confer benefits similar to those of high-impact activities—writing for the student newspaper...being a leader for a student organization or campus committee, and playing intercollegiate athletics, to name a few” (p. 20). A continued focus on improving outcomes for students who participate in cocurricular experiences could strengthen this potential to use them to create deep engagement and student learning, especially the development of critical thinking skills that could be useful in making decisions and solving problems in cocurricular contexts.

Providing students with opportunities to develop their decision-making and problem-solving skills through cocurricular experiences has tremendous potential to make an impact. First, these learning outcomes are best accomplished through experience, and nearly all cocurricular opportunities offer these experiences. Some evidence that this approach works can be found in the 2015 Project CEO data. Involved students rate their skills in decision making and problem solving higher than students who are not involved. The mean score for students who were very involved in multiple organizations was 0.37 points higher in decision making and 0.4 points higher for problem solving when compared to students who indicated they were not involved at all (Griffin, Peck and LaCount, 2017). While data are not currently available to indicate whether involved students actually perform these better than did their uninvolved peers, cocurricular experiences provide many opportunities to practice these important skills. Student leaders set goals, evaluate the effectiveness of their organizations, and seek collaborative solutions to issues that inhibit their effectiveness. If employers are looking for people who can work independently and with others to solve problems and make decisions, clearly student leaders are a good group to recruit.

COMMUNICATION

The abilities to communicate verbally and in writing are essential skills that are highly sought after by employers. The opportunity to develop both of these skills is embedded in students’ academic experiences. Students will be called upon to write a considerable number of papers and give many presentations during their time in college. In the 2015 Project CEO Benchmarking Study, only 1 percent of students indicated that they had not developed the skills of verbal communication and about 5 percent indicated they had not had the opportunity to develop the skill of writing and editing.

Cocurricular experiences also offer many opportunities for students to develop and refine these skills. Students lead meetings, write for campus publications, and speak persuasively about issues about which they are passionate. Student leaders perceived themselves as developing these skills considerably more so than their peers who were not involved. The mean score for students who were very involved in multiple organizations was 0.67 points higher in verbal communication and 0.57 points higher for writing and editing when compared to students who indicated they were not involved at all.

Students join student organizations for many reasons, but the one that most share is that they find the mission of the group compelling and want to help the group meet its goals. This does not tend to attract individuals who are

Communication: the abilities to communicate verbally and in writing are essential skills that are highly sought after by employers.
passive observers within the group. Students who are passionate engage with each other. This provides an excellent context for them to gain communication skills and helps them learn how to function as a member of a team.

TEAMWORK

Teamwork is at the heart of a variety of cocurricular experiences. From intercollegiate athletics, intramural sports, or club teams where students function as part of an actual team to any number of initiatives in which students must work together to accomplish shared goals, for students who are engaged in campus life, opportunities to develop the skill of working in teams abound.

When you ask a student what aspect of college they dislike the most, they may well say that it is their participation in group projects. Most people who have ever participated in a group project have at least one horror story that illustrates the frustrations of working with others. The challenges underscore why the skill of working as a member of a team is so desirable. Certainly group dynamics in the cocurricular environment can still be very challenging, but students' exposure to group work in this context seems to provide them with a positive perspective on group work. The students themselves see a benefit. The mean score for students who were very involved in multiple organizations was 0.71 points higher than students who indicated they were not involved at all.

The skill of working as a member of a team is especially valuable to employers; student leaders have had the chance to refine this skill in college, and can bring this skill to any number of jobs and careers.

FOCUSBING ON ENGAGED STUDENTS

One of the most significant challenges that any business faces is attracting and retaining the best employees. For businesses that rely upon well-prepared recent college graduates, this is particularly important. We suggest that business leaders would be very wise to focus on attracting engaged college students. These students have already demonstrated among the most important characteristics employers are looking for—the desire to engage. They also appear to be more likely than their peers to have developed critical skills from these experiences. For colleges and universities that want to improve their ability to close the gap between the skills naturally produced in college and the needs of employers, focusing on getting students involved also has many benefits.

As we endeavor to improve the outcomes produced by institutions of higher education, open and earnest communication can be very beneficial. For colleges and universities, we must accept and acknowledge that while post-graduation employment is not the sole purpose of education, it is a critical outcome. We must also help our partners in the business community to understand the value of a transformative educational experience. In an age of quantum change, we cannot meet their needs by simply preparing students for “day one” on the job. Success will be measured by how well graduates can meet the demands that will challenge them throughout their careers. A focus on developing transferable skills provides an excellent common ground for us to partner to meet these worthy shared goals.

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**Editor's Note:** Adam Peck and Michael Preston both contributed to the book, “Engagement and Employability: Integrating career learning through cocurricular experiences in postsecondary education.” The book is available through the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education via its website: [www.naspa.org/publications](http://www.naspa.org/publications).

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**CITATIONS**


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