Employers have complained that new college grads are not ready for professional employment. This has been documented in many employer surveys. Common skills employers want include communication, problem-solving, cross-cultural competence, critical thinking, initiative, ethics, teamwork, data management, and several others often referred to as “soft skills.” Employers also report that over half of the students they see are not job ready and need remedial training and heavy onboarding activities. There are two reasons students are not using soft skills. Either they have not learned them (they don’t know what they don’t know), or have not learned how to use them in the workplace (they don’t use what they actually do know).

Every four-year university curriculum teaches many of the skills employers want. Students learn to identify a problem, test a hypothesis, evaluate conflicting opinions, collect data, work in teams, meet deadlines, and communicate verbally as well as written reports. Students do this for four years, but they don’t always apply these skills in the workplace. Colleges are full of very bright people, but the classroom is a totally different environment than a professional job. We need to help students adapt to the environment and culture of the workplace if they are to succeed at their first destination job.

Where do students learn soft skills or how to use them? Part-time jobs and internships. NACE surveys tell us that a little over half of college students get an internship. That still leaves a large fraction of
students without them. And “internships” come in many shapes and sizes. There is no guarantee that an internship or job will develop professional etiquette or teach students how to use soft skills.

With this in mind, Willamette University Career Center staff wanted to see if they could improve things for their students. They read up on the subject of soft skills. Then they surveyed and gathered together several employers who hire students for internships, work-study jobs, and volunteer leadership positions to do a SWOT analysis of their experience supervising student employees. That group generated a list then voted on the “top 10” skills employers felt were most important for students to learn. Then the Career Center staff explored ways to help students learn these skills during college.

**Enter The Passport to Professionalism.**

The solution was to design 10 online learning modules on the top 10 skills employers wanted. MOOCs and online courses provide good learning outcomes for students who actually finish those classes. So who can get students to complete The Passport learning modules? Supervisors and faculty.

The Passport brings the student employee and their supervisor together to establish a calendar of completion dates for each learning module similar to class assignments. For paid positions, students complete the learning modules during work hours. For volunteer jobs, the student and supervisor agree on a schedule. The other person who can make students complete tasks is a professor. Since many students want to earn academic credit for an internship The Passport to Professionalism is structured so that after each learning module, the student completes a one-sheet reflection paper and submits it in writing in a dropbox, Google doc, or hard copy, whichever the professor prefers.
We all know that reading about skills in an assignment is different than actually applying those skills in the workplace. The Passport encourages mentoring and performance evaluation because the student and their boss discuss each reflection piece that the student submits. This is where the boss can mention that the piercing, wrinkled t-shirt, or tight fitting clothes sends the wrong message. Or when the student begins an email with “Hey” they need to re-think professional etiquette. Students also need advice and personal support. The Passport creates up to 12 structured individual sessions with their supervisor to review assignment topics.

Learning new skills requires reflection. In fact, most internships for credit include a journaling component. The Passport utilizes David Kolb’s model for experiential learning which is the industry standard for assessing non-classroom learning in adult education. The Dean of Faculty at Willamette University supports the use of this model as a reflection activity worthy of obtaining academic credit for internships. The Passport even has a section on adding the current internship or job on a resume.

The Modules

The Passport team soon realized that they can only do so much in the short amount of time a student spends in an internship or job. So rather than trying to do it all, they focused on addressing the day to day issues employers said affect them the most. Each module is organized in three steps. Learn, Apply, Reflect (“earn your stamp”). The module opens with a 30 second video introduction to the topic including an interesting “person on the street” testimonial. Then the student reads about the topic (Learn). Next the student is asked to apply the concepts to a case study or assessment, and ultimately their workplace. Finally, the student must reflect on what they learned. The concept behind “earn your stamp” is to provide a short worksheet to be used as talking points with their supervisor.
The Passport Modules:
Communicating face-to-face
Written communication
Professional Etiquette
Your Customer Phones
Teamwork
Ethical Behavior
Taking Initiative
Professional Culture
Career Reflections

Since Career Center staff are not content experts in the topics covered, Willamette University was provided with a grant from the Lilly Foundation Vocational Discernment Project to hire a curriculum developer and video production company to build the modules and video introductions. Once the core curriculum was in place, it was easier to edit and adapt the content to meet their specific needs.

The Passport includes a sample performance evaluation the supervisor can use if they don't already have one. A good performance review is as good or better than a recommendation for future job applications and most undergraduates have never experienced a formal job performance evaluation. There is also a standardized Passport feedback evaluation form students can fill out regarding their experience with the program. This provides data about the effectiveness and usefulness of the program for continual improvement.

How can I use The Passport to Professionalism on my campus or workplace?

The Passport to Professionalism was built to be used off the shelf. Just send your student to the webpage and start the process. Some organizations have used it as is and some have re-branded it and tweaked it somewhat. It is easy to add new modules, modify those already in place, and expand its use to include campus leadership roles, fraternities and sororities, work-study jobs, and many levels of volunteering. The Passport modules are created in Microsoft Word so anyone can copy and adapt the language and format to fit their need, and there is no mention of Willamette University in the modules because they thought that would be a distraction. Go ahead and copy the materials, and Willamette University only asks that you mention in a footnote somewhere you appreciation for the original content. They want to share the wealth, and it aligns with the mission of the Lilly Project funding. It actually took the IT web designer less than 3 hours to embed all 10 Passport to Professionalism modules in the original webpages.
Next Steps

The first thing the Willamette University Career Center did was assign The Passport to Professionalism to their student workers in their own office to see how it would go. They were pleased with the results, and so the director assigned The Passport to students seeking academic credit (since the director supervises all for-credit internships not in a major). Students consistently ranked The Passport experience at 4.5 on a 5 point scale. After that they launched it publicly and are encouraging any and all supervisors and students to use The Passport for their jobs and internships.

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