April 11, 2019

Generation Z student self-assessment in a high-impact practice course

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Generation Z Student Self-Assessment in a High-Impact Practice Course

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Background | Dept. of Comm.

- One of the nation’s largest academic programs of its type
- Advertising | Entertainment/Tourism | Journalism | Public Relations
- Majority of students are first-generation and/or transfer students; many commuters and F/T employed
- 240+ course sections/semester and 800+ graduates each year
- Strong commitment to High-Impact Practice in each concentration
Concerns

• We have always viewed the agency as ‘owned by the students’
• We want to balance student likes and interests with the concept and skills education essential to preparing students for the workplace
• It is a big challenge to reconnect Gen Z students with basic concepts and skills they learned in their earlier courses and then forgot
• Employers consistently tell us graduates need to be stronger writers (hard skill) and critical thinkers (soft skill)
• We wanted to find out how students assess their own strengths and weaknesses, so we can better inform and prepare them for careers

• Our inquiry could easily be replicated in other HIP courses
Data collection

• Anonymous questionnaire for student self-assessment at course end
• Focused on skills students identified; what skills they perceived to have learned; still need help with; and what they’d seek in “do over”
• Five years of survey data (2013 – 2018)
• 452 enrolled, of which 345 (76%) responded
• Respondents identified 598 skills learned in the HIP agency course
• Skills were collapsed into a final list of 42 skill / skill areas
• Students offered 269 “do over” suggestions
Findings

• When asked to identify the skills / skill areas acquired, agency graduates more often than not identified hard skills – specific measurable tasks essential for agency completion.

The top three skills identified were: Client presentation (17%), social media development (7%), creating a campaign book (6%). All are structured tasks that mostly follow an in-house template and are required of all campaigns.

Handout: The 42 skills / skill sets identified by students
Findings

• **Agency graduates were much less likely to identify soft skills as acquired skills**, even though soft skills were a big part of their agency experience and are ultimately critical in all professional work.

Out of 598 offers of professional skills / skill areas acquired, there were only 6 mentions of critical thinking / decision-making / ethics; 2 mentions of dispute resolution; 2 mentions of organizational skills; and 1 mention of vendor relations / communication.
Findings

• Agency graduates made many more offers of skills / skill areas acquired than they did skills / skill areas needing further work.
  • The #1 skill needing work? Writing and editing concepts and practice, including grammar and punctuation (14% of respondents)

• Many important soft skills / skill areas were not widely recognized by graduates either as acquired or needing improvement.
  • 5 or fewer respondents acknowledged needing remedial work on critical thinking/ decision-making/ ethics; workplace expectations; brand awareness; dispute mediation
Findings

• In a “do over,” 21% of agency graduates want more structure, more explanation, different clients and/or different team members.

Note: The student agency has a well-documented and established procedure for assisting students in dealing with ‘problem team members.’ The procedure requires initiation by students. In 7+ years of agency operation, fewer than half a dozen students have initiated the procedure, although student end-of-term complaints of ‘problem team members’ are commonplace.
Moving forward...

• We now have a comprehensive list of skills / skill sets students perceive to be in place in the HIP capstone course
• We affirmed that our Gen Z students are more apt to recognize and value hard skill over soft skill learning
• We affirmed that our Gen Z students’ balance of hard and soft skill learning may not align with employers’ expectations
• We affirmed that our Gen Z students think a good “do over” would be the ability to address interpersonal challenges through more structure or a change of personnel or client
Why we need to act

• Our capstone student agency is, by design, replicating the workplace experience where **hard and soft skills blend**

• At work, **uncertainty is a norm**, especially in advertising and public relations – and in our technologically changing world

• Graduates will **struggle** if they focus on hard skills (‘to do lists’) and avoid uncertainty (‘critical thinking’) in the workplace

• We need to **prepare students for all facets of the workplace**, especially those that are still over the horizon

• Lee Bush (2009) found “lack of student participation” is the biggest risk factor for “agency disintegration.”
Q&A?

I’m happy to provide a copy of the questionnaire.

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To learn more about the HIP agency course:

https://www.practicaladvantagecomm.org
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## Student-run agency skills / skill areas as identified through student comments

Between 2013-2018, senior undergraduates completing a HIP agency capstone experience responded to an anonymous questionnaire asking them to identify skills involved in the agency. In all, 345 respondents offered 598 responses. Using Constant Comparative Analysis, responses were collapsed into 42 skills and skill set areas.

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<th>Media lists / management</th>
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<td>Message creation / framing</td>
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<td>Associated Press Style</td>
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<td>Campaign book / plans book / copy deck</td>
<td>Pitching to client / presentation or public speaking skills</td>
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<td>Campaign structure / management / budgeting</td>
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<td>Cision media management software</td>
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<td>Client communication / presentation / proposal / service</td>
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<td>Creative brief</td>
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<td>Crisis planning / management</td>
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<td>Critical thinking / decision-making / ethics</td>
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<td>Dispute resolution</td>
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<td>Event planning</td>
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<td>Focus group development</td>
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<td>Interpersonal communication / listening skills</td>
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<td>Job interview skills including ‘dress to impress’</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Measurement of outcomes</td>
<td>Writing and editing concepts and practice, including grammar, punctuation and word use.</td>
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