Improved Soft Skills and University Club Involvement: Are They Connected?

Angie Kovarik[1], Gabriel Warren[2]

ABSTRACT

There is a need for business students to develop soft skills in addition to technical skills, in order to successfully transition into the workforce. Hiring managers stress the importance for business students to have strong soft and hard skills in order to be competitive during the job search process. Hiring managers are finding that recent graduates lack soft skills such as presentation, listening, and teamwork, which many jobs require. The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify and determine what changes in soft skills/professional skills, specifically leadership, communication, and networking, business students may develop, after one year of involvement in a university marketing club; based on student perceptions. The results for this study show that business students who are members of an undergraduate university club for one year perceive improvement in the aforementioned soft skills. Based off the findings, business faculty should focus on incorporating soft skill development into their curriculum. Soft skill development could potentially better prepare graduates for entering the workforce.

1.0   Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify and determine what changes in soft skills/professional skills, specifically leadership, communication, and networking, business students may have developed, after one year of involvement in a university marketing club; based on student perceptions.

The need for soft skills in today's workforce is more important than ever (Iyengar, 2017; Ritter, Small, Mortimer, & Doll, 2018). In the past, business executives mainly focused on technical skills, also called hard skills, when recruiting new employees. Iyengar (2017) defines hard skills as one's subject knowledge and expertise that allow someone to perform their job effectively. However, in recent years, soft skills are becoming increasingly important (Robles, 2012). Ritter et al. (2018) defines soft skills as interpersonal skills linked to emotional intelligence. Soft skills are not learned through a textbook; they are learned through practice. In 2017, the Graduate Management Admissions Council surveyed employers to find out what they are looking for in business school hires. They discovered that oral and written communication skills top the list. Other soft skills that ranked high were listening skills, presentation skills, teamwork skills and adaptability. The recruiters

---

[1] Bemidji State University. United States. Email: akovarik@bemidjistate.edu
[2] Bemidji State University. United States. Email: gwarren@bemidjistate.edu

surveyed stated that it is easy to find students that possess hard skills typically learned in the classroom, but the soft skills are lacking and will make the difference in their hiring decision. This is a source of competitive advantage for recent graduates.

Business faculty must ensure that students are equipped with both hard and soft skills in order to better prepare them for the workforce. According to Bullen, Kordecki, and Capener (2018), university business faculty should help prepare students for post-university life by encouraging students to be involved in business clubs and other extracurricular activities. Offering rewards and encouragement to students who participate in these activities benefit the students by exposing them to skills needed for successful careers. Bullen et al. (2018) recommends faculty offer extra credit for students that participate in club activities.

The soft skills that are focused on in this study are leadership, networking, communication skills (oral and written).

2.0 Literature review
2.1 Soft skills

Soft skills, by definition are interpersonal skills that are linked to an individual's personal intelligence (Ritter et al., 2018). Development of soft skills can be difficult to measure, given they cannot be assessed through traditional methods, such as an exam. However, business faculty have a responsibility to ensure that graduates are prepared with both the technical and soft skills needed to be successful in today's workforce (Bullen, Kordecki, and Capener, 2018). Therefore, business faculty have to find ways to introduce, assess, and reinforce the development of soft skills in the student's learning process. Developing soft skills are best learned through activities such as role-playing, continued practicing, and hands on experiences. Participating in a university club gives students the opportunity to engage in such activities, which can be a complement to the technical skills they are learning in the classroom. Having this combination of technical skills and soft skills can increase a recent graduates chances of standing out during interactions with recruiters and hiring managers (GMAC, 2017).

2.2 Leadership skills

Leadership skills are necessary when involved in coaching or training a team, or motivating a group (Ridder, Meysman, Oluwagbemi, and Abeel, 2014). Therefore, effective leadership skills are critical for business careers. Many universities are adding a focus of leadership to their student learning outcomes, as higher education is calling for the development of leadership in the classroom and via extracurricular activities (Foreman and Retallick, 2012). Foreman & Retallick (2012) mentioned that participation in extracurricular activities contributes positively to interpersonal skills and leadership development. They also noted that serving in a leadership role in a university club is related to increased leadership development.

Sarkar, Overton, Thompson, and Rayner (2016) surveyed graduates to determine which skills they felt most useful in their careers, and what skills they wished they had more practice with while in college. The skills the students found the most useful in their careers were generally soft skills such as written communication and leadership skills. When they were asked about what they had wished they had more practice with in college, leadership skills were frequently referenced. Sarkar et al. (2016) also asked employers how they felt about the employee's skills and found that lack of soft skills was creating disappointment among employers. Leadership skills ranked in the top five of this list. Soft skills were considered to be less developed by the employers than hard skills. College graduates that had been in leadership roles in clubs and extracurricular activities felt that the involvement they had in the club significantly increased their job success and interpersonal skills in general (Smith & Chenoworkth, 2015). Faculty should be teaching leadership skills based on a holistic approach, which should include activities outside of the academic classroom.

2.3 Networking skills

Iyengar (2017) defines networking as communicating with and within a group, that facilitates the exchange of information among individuals or a group. Networking is a soft skill that is extremely important for undergraduate business students to learn. Networking skills will help students secure employment, as well as internships (Bullen et al., 2018). Successful networkers usually possess a wide range of other soft skills such as communication skills (Iyengar, 2017). Networking is seen as the culmination of the other soft skills. A study done by Wilkes & Peters (2016) found that the most important soft skills for recent graduates to possess were verbal communication, written communication, team work, and networking skills. This study shows that our students need more attention in the area of soft skill building. Providing students with opportunities to build networking skills prior to being sent to the workplace is one of the keys to employability (Sarkar et al., 2016).

2.4 Communication skills

Communication skills are an important component of working in the field of business. Employers of business graduates have expressed the need for students to have training in communication skills (Matsouka & Mihail, 2016). Not only does communication refer to oral communication, but also written communication,

leadership communication, presentation skills, and interpersonal communication (Anthony & Garner, 2016). Business school faculty are tasked with teaching topics that introduce, reinforce, and assess that students have learned and are able to apply the necessary communication skills in the workforce. Human resource managers highly value business graduates who are able to effectively communicate within teams, among coworkers, and with key stakeholders (Anthony & Garner, 2016). Additionally, active listening, the ability to build trust, and relating to people with diverse backgrounds are also viewed as communication skills by human resource managers (Anthony & Garner, 2016). Providing students with opportunities to further develop the necessary communication skills in the classroom can prepare them for a smoother transition into the workforce.

3.0   Methods

The primary driving factor for our research was our research question: Does student involvement in clubs and other on-campus organizations improve soft skills such as leadership, communication, and networking. In spring semester of 2018, we purposefully selected all marketing club members of a small sized business school in the Upper Midwest to participate in a face-to-face interview concerning their perception of their leadership, communication, and networking soft skill abilities. The students were invited back for the same interview one year later. The participants represented the first cohort of the American Marketing Association's (AMA) collegiate division at the school interviewed. The total number of initial club cohort was 24 undergraduate business students; six agreed to participate in the study over the course of the one-year study. Of the six participants, three were male and three were female. We found that six participants were sufficient as data saturation occurred. The participants were each given a participant number to protect their identities (P1-P6). All participants stated that they were members of the AMA club's initial cohort at the time of study. Six of six participants were majoring in the college of business with a variety of emphases.

The data collection was facilitated through face-to-face semistructured interviews. The data were collected via two separate interviews, the first round taking place the spring of 2018 and the second round taking place the spring of 2019 Each participant selected an interview time and met the two lead researchers in a private meeting room on campus. Each participant was asked a series of eight interview questions, four of which were open-ended, and the other four were based on a numerical rating scale. The open-ended questions were as follows: Can you describe your presentation skills, can you describe your networking skills, can you describe your leadership skills, and can you describe your confidence level in professional settings. A scale of 1-10 was used for the numerical questions, one was considered not skilled and ten was considered highly skilled. The questions asked were in regards to their perceived soft skill abilities in the areas of leadership, communication, and networking. On average, the interviews lasted ten minutes. Each researcher took turns asking questions and both researchers took notes during the interviews. After data collection was complete, the two lead researchers transcribed the interviews and coded data. Data for the open-ended questions was coded by uploading the transcripts into NVivo, and the auto-code feature used to assist with word frequencies and the emergence of themes and patterns. Once the coding was complete, the data were analyzed.

4.0   Results

The majority of participants in this study stated that their comfortability with their soft skills increased during the one year of on-campus club involvement. Three soft skills that were the focus of this study were; leadership skills, networking skills, and communication skills. The results are reported separately for each area.

4.1   Leadership skills

According to our ten-point scale; one being not skilled and ten being highly skilled; over the course of the study period of one year, four of the six participants (67%) ranked their leadership skills higher in year two than at the time of the initial interview. One participant's leadership skills remained the same, and one participant's skills declined. One participant described their leadership skills in year one as decent,

and in year two, stated that their leadership skills had grown in the past year and they are getting better at delegating tasks. This participant ranked their leadership skills at a five in the initial interview, and at an eight in
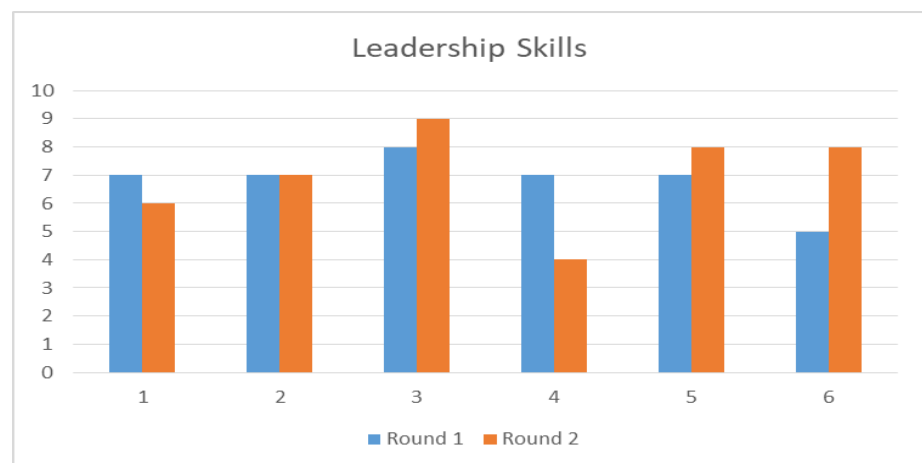
the year two interview. Three participants used the words improvement and growth when describing their leadership skill development over the past year. Confidence, development, and leading by example were other words that were used multiple times (See Table 1 for participant leadership skill ratings)

Club participation in general correlates with leadership development. Leadership skills are practiced in various ways during club interactions and events. Smith and Chenoworth (2015) argued that students engaged in student clubs and organizations rate themselves higher in areas of leadership than non-club members. Ratings based on student perceptions is a common assessment method for assessing leadership behavior (Smith & Chenoworth, 2015).

4.2   Networking skills

When it comes to networking skills, five out of six participants (83%) ranked their skills higher in year two than in year one. One participant ranked their networking skills lower in year two. One of the participants stated in year one that "It is a little hard for me to go to people so I take my time to get to know them". In year two that participant replied "I used to be an introvert and not willing to speak much to people who I am not familiar with. After getting involved in student organizations, I started to step out of my comfort zone to talk to people and share my thoughts and opinions". This participant rated their networking skills a three in year one and six in year two. Three of the participants used the word confidence when describing their networking skill development over the past year. Three participants mentioned that their relationship-building skills improved over the year. Other words used were growth, stepping out of comfort zone, and ability to communicate. (See Table 2 for participant networking skill ratings)

Student organizations such as this can create strong skills and increase personal growth for the students involved

(Bullen et al., 2018). Students participating in clubs are exposed to "real-world" scenarios and will be more likely to participate in groups as they progress in their careers. When students are involved in clubs or other extracurricular activities, they are able to practice their networking skills. This can also be in the form of social networking with their peers during club events. This type of networking has been known to increase enthusiasm for learning.

4.3   Communication skills

Similar to the results for networking skills, five of the six participants (83%) showed an increase in their communication skills from years one to two. Again, one of the six participants ranked their communication skills lower in year two then in year one. (See Table 3 for participant communication skill ratings)

"I would describe my communication skills as pretty mediocre" was a participant's description in year one. In year two that
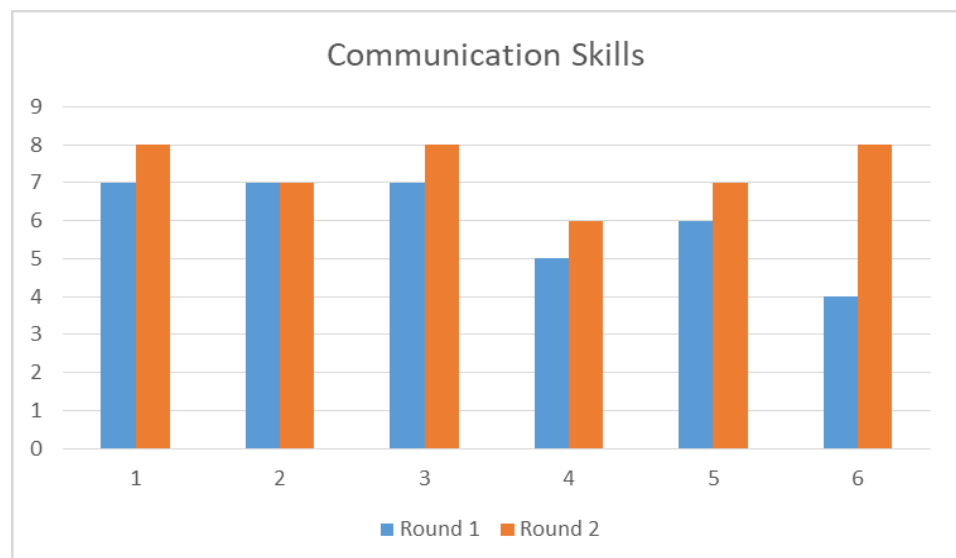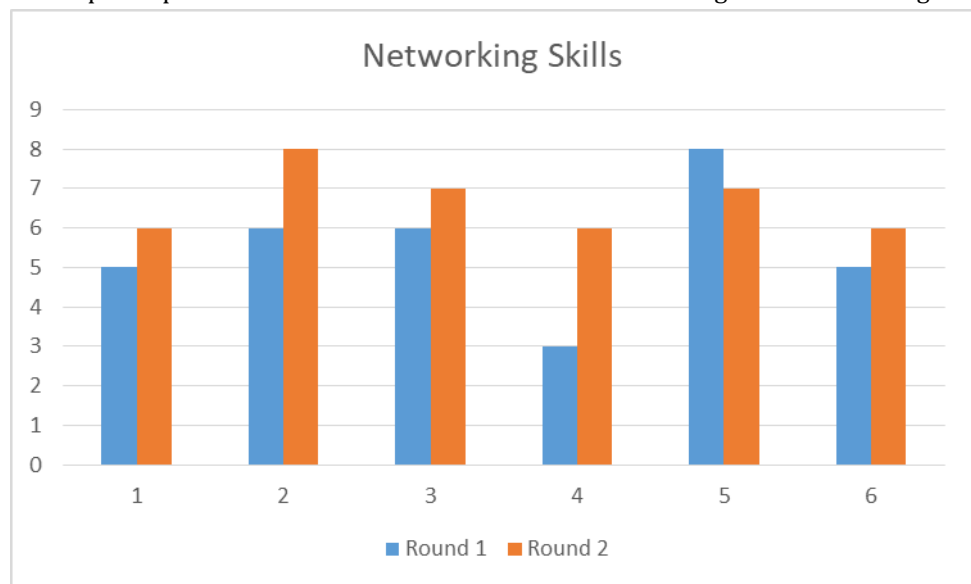
participant said that they were more confident in their communication skills and willing to speak more often. This individual rated their communication skills at a four in year one, and eight in year two. Three participants mentioned that they are more willing to speak in front of a group of people after the year of university club involvement. Four participants stated that they are more confident in their communication skills. Other keywords used were relationship skills, comfort level improved, experience, and growth.

Overall, the majority of students in this study cited an increase in their leadership, networking, and communication skills over the course of the year while involved in an on-campus club.

5.0   Conclusions

Developing soft skills is a vital component for students heading out into today's workforce. Working in teams, and with individuals of diverse backgrounds requires a practiced skill set. It is essential for undergraduate business students to gain not only hard skill knowledge, but soft skill knowledge as well. Our results show that business students can learn soft skills from student clubs and campus organizations, which will further prepare them for the workforce. We found that 67% of participants surveyed ranked their leadership skills higher after one year of university club involvement, 83% of participants ranked their networking skills higher after one year of club involvement, and 83% of participants ranked their communication skills higher after one year of club involvement. Overall, being a part of a university club has a positive impact of soft skill development. It is important for faculty to complement what is being learned in the classroom by encouraging students to participate in outside activities. The earlier a student gets involved in students clubs, the more likely they will be able to develop and strengthen their soft skills, which would give them a competitive advantage when they are entering the workforce.

This research study is limited in scope due to the small participant size, which could limit the findings (Maxwell, 2005). We acknowledge that the participant's self-perceptions might not align with their true skill levels. We acknowledge that not all participants were equally perceptive, articulate, or willing to share and therefore may not have contributed equally as stronger participants may have. Another limitation might be that the students are not as willing to share, or they may have expressed increased skillset levels due the fact that the lead researchers were also their faculty members and club advisors.

Given that our research consisted of one student club on campus, our first recommendation is to consider extending the study to all campus clubs. Extending the interviews to more student clubs would increase the number of participants. We used a qualitative design; however, a quantitative survey may have provided a larger sample size and additional data to analyze. Additionally, researchers could ask additional questions to find out if the soft skill development came from student clubs, or other activities. Our final recommendation is to ask outside members to rank the participant's soft skill improvement/decline in lieu of self-assessment. The results of this study provide support for business faculty to implement soft skill development into their curriculum, and encourage university club involvement. The increase in soft skill development would have a positive impact on the workforce based on the soft skills that hiring managers are currently seeking.

References

Abrahamowicz, D. (1988). College involvement perceptions and satisfaction: A study of membership in student organizations. Journal of College Student Development, 29, 233-238.

Anthony, S., & Garner, B. (2016). Teaching Soft Skills to Business Students: An Analysis of Multiple Pedagogical Methods. Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, 79(3), 360–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490616642247

Bullen, M., Kordecki, G., & Capener, E. (2018). Student engagement activities to enhance

professional advancement in accounting and business careers. Journal of Instructional Pedagogies, 20,1-12. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1178757

Conrad, D., & Newberry, R. (2011). 24 business communication skills: Attitudes of human resource managers versus business educators. American Communication Journal, 13(1), 4–23

Foreman, E., & Retallick, M. (2012). Undergraduate involvement in extracurricular activities and leadership development in college of agriculture and life sciences students. Journal of Agricultural Education, 53(3), 111-123. doi:10.5032/jae.2012.03111

Graduate Management Admission Council (2017). What employers are looking for in 2017 business hires. Retrieved from https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/research-insights/employment-outlook/what-employers-are-looking-for-in-2017-business-school-hires

Iyengar, R.V. (2017). People Matter: Networking and career development. The IUP Journal of Soft Skills, 11(1), 7-16. Retrieved from
https://search.proquest.com/openview/7177c11cc8e5947265ab72f9cae7b861/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2029989

Matsouka, K., & Mihail, D. M. (2016). Graduates' employability: What do graduates and employers think? Industry and Higher Education, 30(5), 321–326. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422216663719

Maxwell, J.A. (2005). Qualitative Research Design: An interactive approach (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Incorporated.

Messum, D.G., Wilkes, L. M., & Peters, K. (2016). Employability skills in health services management: Perceptions of recent graduates. Asia Pacific Journal of Management, (11) 1, 25-32. Retrieved from https://journal.achsm.org.au/index.php/achsm/article/view/235

Mitchell, G. W., Skinner, L. B. & White, B. J. (2010). Essential soft skills for success in the twenty-first century workforce as perceived by business educators. Delta Pi Epsilon Journal, 52, 43-53.

Robles, M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace.

Business Communications Quarerly,75(4), 452-465. doi:10.1177/1080569912460400

Ritter, A., Small, E., Mortimer, J., and Doll, J. (2018). Designing management curriculum for workplace readiness: Developing student soft skills. Journal of Management Education, 42(1), 80-103. doi:10.1177/1052562917703679

Ritter, D., Meysman, P., Oluwagbemi, O., and Abeel, T. (2012). Soft skills: An important asset acquired from organizing regional student group activities. PLOS Computational Biology, 10(7), 1-3. doi:10.1671/journal.pcbi1003708

Sarkar M., Overton, T., Thompson, C., & Rayner, G. (2016). Graduate employability: Views of recent science graduates and employers. International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics Education, 24(3), 31-48. Retrieved from
https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/CAL/article/view/11043

Smith, L., Chenoworth, J. (2015). The contributions of student organization involvement to students' self-assessments of their leadership traits and relational behaviors. American Journal of Business Education, 8(4), 279-288. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1077872