Unpacking Your Student’s Enrichment Experiences: A How-To Guide

Students often have trouble connecting their co-curricular experiences to skills they have developed and then articulating those skills to prospective employers. Since these outside-the-classroom experiences are highly valued by our institution, it behooves us to help students make meaning of these experiences.

Research from the College Employment Research Institute (see the chart below) has shown that employers place varying levels of importance on activities students choose to participate in while in college. That 97% of employers placed little to moderate importance on study abroad experience suggests that students may be failing to articulate the value of, and skills gained from, their international experiences.

By asking students pointed questions about their experiences, you can help them discover the skills they have gained, such as communication skills, teamwork, and more. Below is a list of the top 10 skills employers want in their employees as well as tips and sample questions to help guide the conversation.

**Top 10 Skills Employers Seek***:

1. Communication Skills (Verbal) 6. Problem Solving Skills
2. Strong Work Ethic 7. Communication Skills (Written)
3. Teamwork 8. Interpersonal Skills (Relates well to others)
5. Initiative 10. Flexibility/Adaptability

*National Association of Colleges and Employers.

**Employer Ratings of Importance of Selected Student Engagement Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-curricular Activity</th>
<th>Little Importance</th>
<th>Some to Moderate Importance</th>
<th>Great Deal of Importance</th>
</tr>
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<td>Career-related work</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-op</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>Leadership in an organization</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student organizational membership</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>Community service</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>Diversity training</td>
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<td>62</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Athletic participation</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Tips for Faculty/Staff:

- Help students tell their stories. Articulation of skills and self-discovery comes from students telling stories about their experiences.
- Ask probing questions. “What did you learn about yourself from that experience?”
- Establish a context for student reflection relative to their future life plans (e.g., employment field, graduate school).
- Ask questions that provoke students to make connections. Why? How?
- Use a novice approach. Ask questions to build your understanding or technical competence in the field. You need not demonstrate expertise, but the student should.
- Push the envelope. Students make important realizations and associations when they stretch their limits.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS
(Can be adapted to the specific experience and answers should be drawn from that experience):

- Tell me why you got involved in these experiences on campus?
- Think back to yourself in high school – how have you changed? How have your experiences played a role in this change?
- Share an example of a time when your involvement on campus placed you in a group of diverse individuals. How did you respond in these situations? What role did you play? What did you learn about yourself?
- How have your experiences improved or affected your communication skills? How might this make you a better professional in your field?
- Tell me about a time when you had to handle a stressful situation.
- Share an example of how you adapted or adjusted to a new environment. How do you see that influencing your ability to interact with colleagues in the future?
- Did you ever take initiative on a project with a student organization? What did you do and what did you learn?
- How do you handle conflict? Do you have an example of how you negotiated a conflict within a student group or with your friends?

Asking contextually meaningful questions like those suggested above:

- Stimulates critical thinking
- Advances integration of student learning -- and helps them “connect the dots”!
- Enhances self-discovery and increases knowledge essential for presenting oneself as a successful candidate

Resources adapted from materials created by:
Phil Gardner, Ph.D. 
Collegiate Employment Research Institute 
Michigan State University
Linda Gross, Ph.D.
Career Services Network 
Michigan State University

For further discussion:
Megan O’Rourke 
Program Director, Experiential Education and Internships 
University of Maryland
Morourk2@umd.edu
Colette Fournier 
Experiential Education Advisor 
University of Maryland
Colette@umd.edu