



Grading Personal Responsibility

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By

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Grades earned by many students at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College will soon factor in “soft skills,” such as whether they show up for class on time or work well in groups. And next year the college will issue workplace readiness certificates alongside conventional credentials to recognize those skills.

Located in Asheville, N.C., A-B Tech, as it is commonly known, has developed a [template](#) that helps faculty members determine how to incorporate eight primary workplace expectations into grading, including personal responsibility, interdependence and emotional intelligence. Soft skills should count for 8 to 10 percent of grades in courses that adopt those guidelines, college officials said.

“We’re teaching our students to walk the walk,” said Jean B. Finley, an instructor of business computer technologies.

Academic departments will have flexibility in deciding how to use workplace readiness grading. For example, some soft skills might be easier to measure in disciplines like nursing or culinary arts, which generally lead to jobs with clear demands. Liberal arts programs can be trickier. However, the central concept will be applicable across the curriculum, according to college officials.

A certificate based on a student’s passing marks on self-awareness – one of A-B Tech’s soft skill categories – might seem like a squishy idea. But the benefits of learning to how behave and

perform in the workplace are very real, said Sue Olesiuk, A-B Tech's dean of academic success.



“You’re going to have a better chance of getting a job and keeping a job,” she said.

The certificates will come with short explanations aimed at employers. And students will be able to earn them in tandem with traditional degrees and certificates.

The project is not just about getting to class on time (although A-B Tech does take roll in all its classes, and requires a minimum threshold of attendance). For example, community college students are often more independent than their counterparts at residential, four-year colleges. They may be older and typically have less guidance on how to navigate college or the office-

place. So Olesiuk said A-B Tech plans to grade students on how they work with others, including their peers in study groups, librarians and faculty members.

In addition, some students at A-B Tech need to learn that it's better to communicate their competing time demands to a professor, or future boss, rather than staying mum. That could mean explaining in a professionally worded e-mail why they need to get their kid to school and will be late for class. And the expectation is that students will take the initiative to figure out what they missed in class.

The main goal is to encourage students to take personal responsibility and display a strong work ethic, said Melissa Quinley, A-B Tech's vice president of instructional services. That's because the college wants its students to believe that "I've got to give it my very best," she said, both in class and on the job.

Making It Mandatory

Colleges are facing increasing pressure to measure student learning and to prove that the degrees they issue are worth the investment. And employers say they want to hire graduates with critical thinking skills who arrive understanding how to be professional.

Quinley said local employers are generally pleased with the technical and academic accomplishments of A-B Tech students. But soft skills can be a problem. For example, she said the college recent held a focus group with welding companies, where some participants said A-B Tech graduates were talented and got the welding part, but that some showed up late for work too often.

Hank Dunn, A-B Tech's president since 2010, wants to change that. He got the ball rolling for the college's workplace readiness program. And while the central administration leaves many decisions to department chairs and individual faculty members, they want it to be adopted broadly.

For example, if a department decides that soft skills should be graded in one course, all sections of that course must incorporate them.

College officials also said the workplace readiness certificate must be based on rigorous assessment if it is to carry any weight with employers. The project will obviously backfire if A-B Tech students go into the workplace armed with the certificates but can't perform well on the job.

"We're putting our name on the line, too," said Olesiuk.

A-B Tech's approach gels with the recommendations of Kay McClenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement. McClenney [advocates](#) for community colleges to set more mandatory requirements for students, including the use of academic support services.

That's not always an easy ask in the two-year sector, which generally resists paternalism. Elite private colleges make their students do lots of things, like requiring them to attend orientation or meet with their academic advisers. But community colleges like to treat students like adults. While there's nothing wrong with that principle, McClenney and other experts said community colleges need to push mandatory requirements if they help students get to graduation, even basic ones like participation in study groups.

Not everyone at A-B Tech is fully on-board with the workplace readiness program, Quinley said. But she predicted that the holdouts would come around quickly, in part because the approach will boost academic performance.

Finley agreed. She has been teaching soft skills for more than 20 years, which she said encourages higher quality academic work.

"My students are able to prioritize better," Finley said. "My supervisor expects me to be a problem solver. And that's what I expect of my students."