

Beyond The Syllabus: Helping Students Develop Workforce Readiness and Life Skills

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Abstract

In addition to developing the knowledge and skills covered in a specific course, students need to develop workforce readiness skills that employers are seeking along with the life skills that will allow students to be successful in all aspects of their lives. These skills, especially workforce readiness skills, are receiving significant attention in discussions about the value of a college education and whether higher education is meeting the needs of employers. Employer surveys about student proficiency in a range of workforce readiness skills show clear room for improvement. This work provides background about why it is important to help students develop workforce readiness and life skills, along with sharing resources for both areas. Additionally, it reports on the efforts of a recent Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) effort to explore the workforce readiness resources provided by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and reports on several efforts to integrate workforce readiness in course content and activities. Course resources are shared with discussion of how they were used, and student and instructor feedback.

Keywords: workforce readiness, life skills, student development, curriculum.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Students attend college to help them achieve their life goals, which can include professional and personal aspects. However, at school, the focus is typically on taking and passing a specific set of courses. This presents the risk that students will not understand and develop the skills they need to achieve their specific life goals. This work discusses an effort to explore how course activities can include efforts to help students understand and develop the skills needed for success in the workforce and life in general.

The goals for a class are stated in the course syllabus, usually in the form of a few clearly stated learning outcomes, often accompanied by a paragraph summarizing these. The learning outcomes are usually stated in academic terms, often using Bloom's Taxonomy, and focus on the learning that students are expected to do during a single semester (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). At some schools, the learning outcomes are reviewed and approved as part of official curriculum processes.

The goals stated in the syllabus are the goals defined by the department and course instructor. Other people involved in the educational process, including students, governing bodies at the federal and state level, and future employers, will have goals that go beyond those stated in the syllabus. For a student, goals at the semester level may include passing the class and learning the course content, but should be connected to larger, long-term goals such as earning a degree, being able to get a job that will allow them to support themselves, or just following a passion. Goals for governing bodies and potential employers will often focus on whether students are gaining the skills that employers need and whether students will be able to quickly provide value when they are hired by an employer.

Some of the skills and knowledge needed to support longer-term goals can be developed as part of achieving the stated learning objectives for a course, but instructors need to clearly consider these additional goals to better align courses with students' goals. It is also useful to consider this alignment at the program, or even at the university level, so that the efforts of individuals in one course or program reinforce efforts that students see in other courses and programs. An excellent example of this is efforts to develop skills like writing, where a school may have a writing center to provide writing tutors for students and professional resources to help instructors develop and improve writing assignments in their courses.

An additional reason for organized efforts to develop these skills is to allow departments and universities to productively engage in ongoing discussions about the value and affordability of higher education, many of which focus on the need for higher education to directly support local and state economic development goals. These discussions often focus on ensuring that college graduates are workforce (or career) ready, which the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) sees as "key to ensuring successful entrance into the workforce" (NACE, n.d.-a).

As has already been noted, instructors are including content and assignments that develop workforce readiness and life skills in their courses. The goals of this paper are to bring attention to the increased discussion of this topic, share resources to help readers learn about the wide range of workforce readiness and life skills, and share practical ideas from a local Center for Teaching and Learning's effort to directly address development of workforce readiness in courses from multiple departments.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Increased Focus on Workforce Readiness

While employment has clearly been one of the main focuses of higher education, in recent years, there has been increasing focus on the connections between higher education and employment, especially for

public colleges and universities. The 2026 report from the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) on state higher education priorities for 2026 ranks economic and workforce development as the highest priority, ahead of the widely discussed issue of affordability, reinforcing “the longstanding value of workforce alignment between postsecondary studies and career readiness” (SHEEO, 2026, p. 8).

Looking specifically at the state of Ohio, recent state budgets have required “state colleges and universities to implement meaningful work-based learning programs, ensuring more students gain real-world experience before graduation” and have also “proposed tying \$100 million of college and university funding to graduates’ employment outcomes” (Eagleson, 2025).

2.2 Workforce Readiness

Discussions on workforce/career readiness focus on ensuring that new graduates can successfully transition from school to providing value for an employer. For many years, NACE has worked to develop and refine career readiness competencies. Their current version defines eight groups of career readiness competencies (NACE, n.d.-a):

1. Career and self-development
2. Communication
3. Critical Thinking
4. Equity and Inclusion
5. Leadership
6. Professionalism
7. Teamwork
8. Technology (note that this is not about specific technologies, but rather broad skills related to identifying and using appropriate technology, working with information, etc.)

Many, or even most of these, do get attention from IS educators. The IS2020 Competency Model discusses leadership, communication, critical thinking, and teamwork under the heading of Individual Foundational Competencies (Leidig & Salmela, 2020, p. 49). In addition, the IS education literature has long featured discussions about the need to include “soft skills” such as writing and communication in IS courses (Saulnier, 2016; Liu & Murphy, 2012; Pomykalski, 2006).

NACE regularly surveys employers to assess the current environment. The most recent survey shows that employers find that 21.6% of college graduates are very well prepared for the workforce, but that the majority (71.2 %) are only “somewhat well prepared,” showing clear room for improvement (NACE, 2026, p. 28).

The NACE survey also asked employers to rank the importance of the different competency areas. Note that this survey used a competency area focused on AI in place of the Equity and Inclusion area. The results are shown in Figure 1. On a scale of 1 – 5, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and professionalism all ranked between 4.3 and 4.5, falling into the range between very and extremely important. Employers were also to rate the proficiency of recent graduates on career readiness skills. These results are shown in Figure 2. Note that while the average score for all skills is above somewhat proficient (3), none of the skills have averages above very proficient (4), again showing clear room for improvement.



Figure 1. Employer rating of the importance of the different career readiness competencies (NACE, 2026, p. 24).



Figure 2. Employer rating of recent graduates' career readiness competencies (NACE, 2026, p. 25).

The NACE report also presents a graphic that combines these two measures, as shown in Figure 3, showing the percentage of employers who rate a specific career competency as very or extremely important in green while showing the percentage of employers who feel that recent college graduates are very or extremely proficient in these competencies in red. This graphic shows that for three of the

four competencies employers see as most important, student proficiency rates are in the 50% range, with only teamwork scoring higher at 75%.

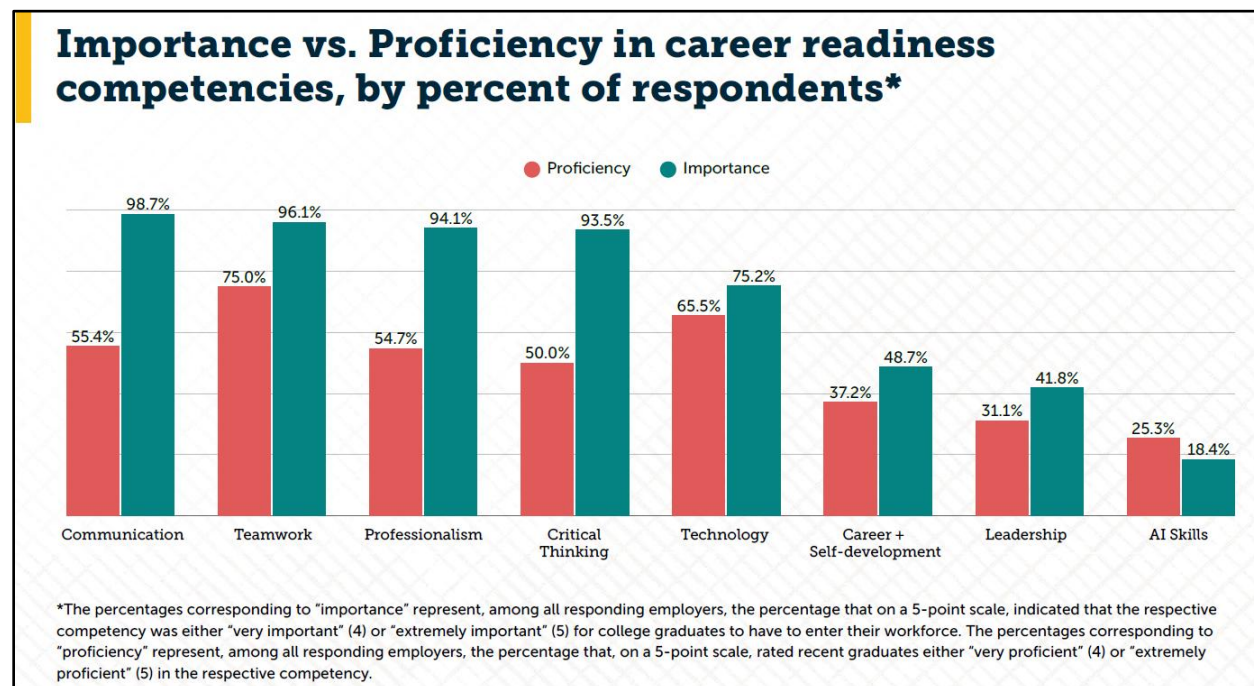


Figure 3. Importance versus proficiency for career readiness competencies NACE, 2026, p. 26).

Unfortunately, the NACE survey data is not broken out by industry, where one could hypothesize that IS students would do better with skills such as teamwork and critical thinking. However, the general data does provide guidance to help instructors prioritize which career readiness competencies they might focus on first.

Another resource with useful research about employers' views on how well higher education is preparing students is "The Agility Imperative" report from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (Finley, 2025). In addition to discussing the essential learning outcomes that employers are seeking, this report also addresses how "higher education's contributions to the public good, including career attainment, has also expanded in important ways" (p. 1). Key findings include that employers "continue to endorse a broad range of skills, abilities, and mindsets as essential for workforce success" and that a "student's engagement in hands-on, applied experiences can help them stand out in the hiring process," especially for younger employers (p.2)

2.3 Life Skills

Developing workforce readiness skills will help students land a job when they graduate, but there is more to life than work. Success in achieving broader goals in life, including succeeding in their first job and progressing beyond the entry-level job, requires a broader set of life skills. Developing life skills should be an ongoing activity for students, but as they reach graduation, their focus should shift from the skills needed to succeed in a somewhat sheltered college environment to the skills needed to succeed in the world after college. Many schools offer a first-year experience course to help students successfully transition into college. Continuing these efforts as students progress in their program of study can help students successfully transition to life after college. Table 1 offers a brief comparison of the life skills needed to successfully start college to the life skills that may be needed to successfully transition to life after college. This table was developed by the author based on discussions with recent graduates about their experiences with life after college.

Category	Skills for Success in College	Skills for Success after College
Living	Transition to a dorm or college apartment. Eating at dining hall.	Full-time apartment living; moving towards home ownership
Financial	Basic budgeting, student loans	Longer-term budgeting, saving for house, vacation, etc. Retirement planning (401K, etc.)
Life goal	Earning college degree	May include travel, hobbies, starting a family, homeownership, etc.
Career goals	First job in field related to college degree	Promotion, getting “ideal” job, starting a business, etc.

Table 1. Comparison of life skills for successful transition into college versus successful transition to life after college.

Several sources provide useful information about the life skills that students need, along with research and motivation for helping students develop these skills. Note that many of the resources that discuss life skills cover a broad range of individuals, including K-12 students, higher education, and adults.

A final source of information about the life skills students need to develop during their time in college is discussion with recent graduates. Some of the needs that the author has identified from these discussions include information about the performance planning and assessment process that employers use, information about organizational culture and how to navigate different types of organizational culture, understanding and taking advantage of employer benefit packages, and financial literacy for things like investing for retirement or purchasing a house.

America Succeeds has conducted research leading to the concept of durable skills, which “include a combination of how you use what you know – skills like critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity – as well as character skills like fortitude, growth mindset, and leadership.” (America Succeeds, 2021). Looking at the competencies that America Succeeds has defined for durable skills, many overlap with the workforce readiness competencies defined by NACE, while others like patience and integrity fall into our life skills category – things that will help a student as they work towards their personal goals.

Another source of information about life skills is Lifehub (Lifehub, n.d.). Although their main focus is youth, their resources provide useful definitions of life skills and discussions that provide motivation for why students need to develop these skills.

3. RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS

There is a wealth of resources available to help faculty add content and activities related to workforce readiness and life skills development. In addition to adding content related to these topics to specific courses, there is also value in specifically discussing the concepts of workforce readiness and life skills as part of a concentrated effort to ensure that students have all of the skills needed to be successful after graduation, not just the IS/IT specific skills addressed by course learning outcomes. Since the classroom activities discussed in this paper focus on workforce readiness, this will be the focus of the resource discussion, but the resources mentioned in section 2.3 provide a wealth of useful information.

There is value in using a consistent approach across multiple courses so that students see a similar discussion of workforce readiness and life skills concepts. This allows activities in later courses to build on efforts from earlier courses. In many ways, these efforts are similar to first-year experience courses that seek to help students successfully transition into college. But rather with the focus on ensuring that students are ready to successfully transition into the professional workforce.

NACE provides a number of useful resources for faculty. A good starting point is checking to see if your college or university is a member of NACE (NACE, n.d.-b). Next, review the definition of the eight career

readiness competencies (NACE, n.d.-a). In addition to providing a short definition for each of the competencies, a short list of sample behaviors is also provided. The definitions and behaviors can be used to assess how existing course content already addresses the workforce readiness competencies. An assessment of all of the courses in a department's curriculum could also be useful to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The nature of the content in an IS/IT program may make it strong in some areas like critical thinking but have less coverage of other workforce readiness competencies.

NACE also offers an assessment tool, which is free to members (NACE, n.d.-d). For each of the eight career readiness competencies, the tool provides a rubric that can be used to assess students. In addition, the assessment tool includes a user manual with use cases and other supporting material.

For institutions wanting to implement the workforce readiness competencies across a wide range of campus programs and activities, NACE offers several professional development programs to help faculty and staff "learn practical ways to integrate competencies into courses, assignments, and co-curricular experiences". These include the NACE Fellows program and a Learning Community program (NACE, n.d.-c).

Another excellent source of ideas for including workforce readiness competencies in a course is the existing IS/IT education literature. IS/IT educators have been working to address these competencies in their courses, providing many ideas to support efforts to increase workforce readiness content in IS/IT courses.

Since development of workforce readiness is focused on employment, your college or university's career planning office is another great resource. They should already be familiar with many of the workforce readiness competencies and may have specific information from the employers they work with. They can help students understand how to talk about their workforce readiness skills on resumes, in cover letters, and during interviews. Additionally, they could help faculty connect with employers to learn about their specific needs or become engaged directly with students in their courses.

4. EXAMPLES

This section provides examples of how workforce readiness and life skills can be included in a course. These were developed and used during a year-long program sponsored by a center for teaching (CTL) and learning at a campus of a public, regional university. The program was prompted by planned changes to ensure the campus provided a clear benefit to employers in the state, with the CTL leadership identifying the NACE competencies as a useful resource for this effort. Examples are from faculty in multiple departments, including Information Technology.

A useful starting point is helping students understand that employers are looking for things beyond the skills and knowledge that are the focus of a specific course. This can be done by explicitly introducing students to the NACE workforce readiness competencies. Appendix A offers a couple of examples of how this might be done.

The first example provides a comprehensive overview of the NACE competencies, starting with a chart from the NACE reports showing how employers rate the importance of and student proficiency with each of the competencies. This is followed by a brief explanation of what each competency is and how students can develop the competency in a course.

Example 2 in Appendix A provides a briefer introduction to the NACE competencies that focuses on four competencies – communication, teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking. These were selected for their importance to employers and low reported student proficiency.

Either of these examples could be included in a course syllabus and briefly discussed on the first day of class. Instructors could also modify either of these examples to provide examples that are specific to the course, or a department could develop a version that offers examples specific to the IS/IT field. Note that some courses may not offer students opportunities to develop a particular competency. For example, it will be hard for students to work on teamwork in courses that do not have group work.

These introductions were also used with the assignment shown in Example 3 in Appendix A. This assignment was used early in the semester with the goal of prompting students to learn about the NACE career readiness outcomes and make connections between the outcomes and the student's future career plans. Note that the assignment format follows recommendations from the Transparency in Learning & Teaching (TILT) Higher Ed resources, which are recommended by the CTL (TILT, n.d.).

During CTL sessions, faculty from a number of departments, including the author, reported on the results of using this assignment. This assignment was implemented in courses in several departments, including IT, at both introductory and upper-level courses. All of the faculty reported a positive experience from using the assignment, noting that it was easy to grade and gave instructors more insight into students' long-term goals. For example, knowledge about student career goals could help an instructor choose more relevant examples for class discussions. Instructors teaching classes taken by non-majors to satisfy university distribution requirements found that this assignment helped students find a positive, internal motivation for taking the course. One instructor teaching a linguistics course mainly taken by non-majors also reported that the AI tools are useful in helping identify how course content could be relevant to students in other majors.

Several instructors also used the career readiness competencies in end-of-semester assignments. The most common end-of-semester assignment closed the loop on the assignment from Example 3 in Appendix A by asking students to review their submission to the earlier assignment and write a written reflection on how they developed the three career readiness skills identified in the earlier assignment. Instructors also reported positive experiences with this assignment, with most students making clear connections between their work in the course and development of specific career readiness skills. In addition to traditional written submissions, instructors also found it useful to have students record a 30-second elevator pitch where they discussed how they developed the three competencies identified in the earlier assignment.

Some instructors tried other end-of-semester assignments. One used an assignment where students updated their resumes to include their work in the course. The students were prompted to think about both the formal course content covered by the course learning outcomes along with the NACE career readiness competencies.

5. DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

The CTL sponsored work done over the past year has developed several ways to incorporate the NACE workforce readiness competencies into class activities and assignments. This work can be assessed from three perspectives – faculty, students, and campus administration.

A few faculty members took the lead in exploring how the NACE competencies could be incorporated into class content and assignments. As they shared their work over the year, additional faculty adopted their work into additional classes. All of the faculty who used NACE content in their courses reported a positive experience. The content was shared through the campus learning management system (LMS), making it easy for faculty to add the content to their courses. Faculty found that the NACE competencies provided a useful framework for discussing the additional skills that are needed for career success. Also, using the NACE research on the workforce readiness competencies provided a useful external "expert" that caught students' attention.

Faculty consistently reported positive student responses to content and activities based on the NACE workforce readiness competencies. In many cases, students' written submissions show students making connections between the workforce readiness competencies, the course activities, and their future career plans. Since this was an initial exploration and development effort, no formal methods were used to assess students' views, but efforts including surveys are planned as part of the further development of these ideas.

The campus administration had a positive reaction to the CTL efforts, finding that the NACE resources about workforce readiness provided a useful way to support discussions about upcoming changes to the campus mission with faculty, staff, prospective employers, and other community members. Funding was provided for one instructor to complete the NACE Faculty & Staff Fellows Program. Based on this instructor's experience, funds have been found for additional faculty to complete this program.

Given the upcoming change to the campus mission, workforce readiness was the main focus of recent efforts. This will probably be the focus of ongoing efforts, especially as the campus transitions to its new mission. Discussions about how to help students develop the life skills needed after graduation will continue with faculty, the CTL, and student affairs staff.

While the current focus of the CTL is on sharing what was learned during this initial exploration with a wider audience, individual faculty are also continuing to look at the larger set of life skills that students need to succeed in life after college.

6. CONCLUSIONS

While the main focus of IS/IT educators should continue to be the skills and knowledge needed for existing and emerging jobs in the field, educators should consider other skills and knowledge that can help students succeed in their lives after college. Workforce readiness and life skills build on previous efforts to incorporate communication and other non-technical skills into student learning. The NACE research provides clear information about the skills current employers are looking for and their assessment of students' proficiency with these skills, highlighting gaps that instructors can work to address in the classes.

Adopting a consistent set of resources to support class activities on workforce readiness skills and life skills can allow the efforts of individual faculty to build on each other. Additionally, an organized effort to incorporate workforce readiness at the department, college, or even university level can help the organization align with local and national efforts to ensure that higher education programs provide value to students and the larger community.

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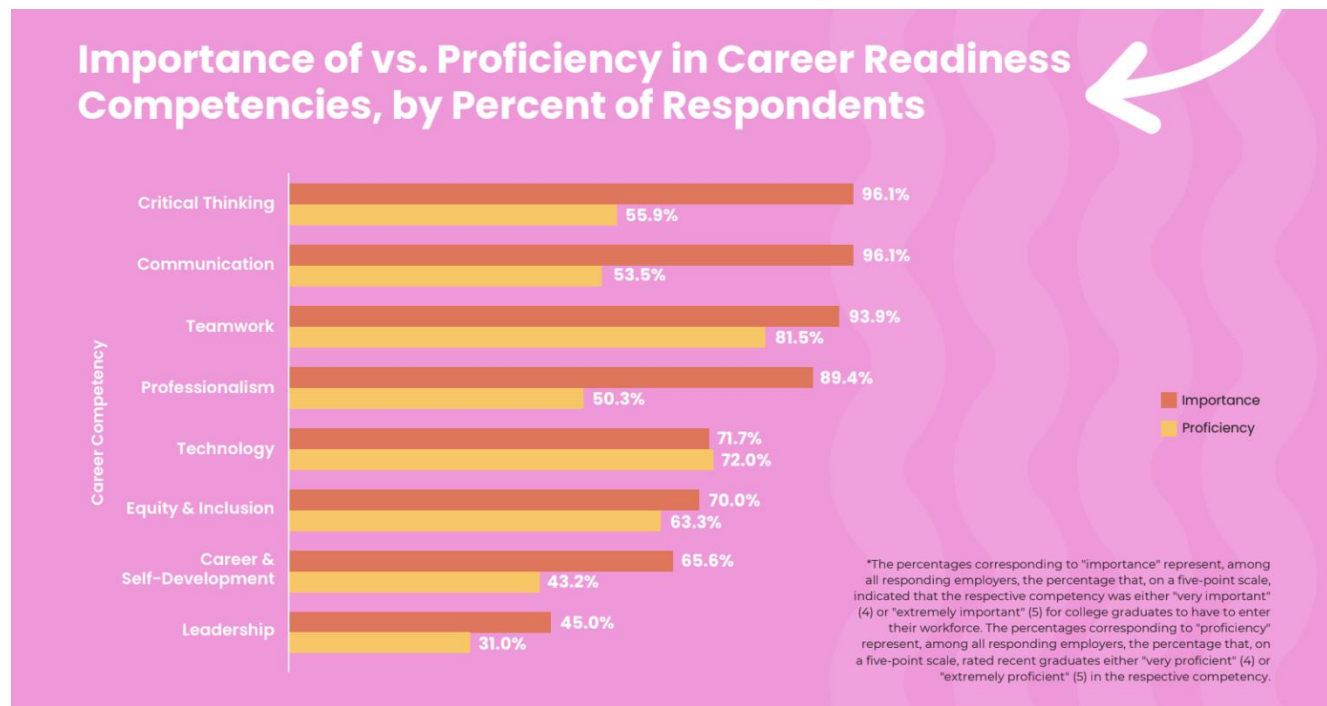
APPENDIX A

Resources to Introduce NACE Workforce Readiness Competencies

Example 1. Comprehensive overview of the NACE Career Readiness Competencies

Develop Your Career Readiness Competencies

This course is designed to help you prepare proactively for your future career by practicing core competencies that employers consistently rate as very or extremely important. Consider the slide below from the Job Outlook 2025 report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Note that for every competency except for Technology, employers report that recent graduates do not have a level of proficiency that matches the level of importance of that competency.



Consider the following competencies and how you can develop your proficiency in those competencies in any course:

- **Critical Thinking**
 - **What is this competency?** Analyzing information carefully, questioning assumptions, and creating solutions to problems.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Go beyond memorization. Compare viewpoints in readings, explain my reasoning in assignments, and challenge myself to ask "why" and "how" questions.
- **Communication**

- **What is this competency?** Sharing ideas clearly through writing, speaking, or other forms so others can understand and respond.
- **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Practice writing and speaking for different audiences, participate in class discussions, give constructive feedback to peers, and ask thoughtful questions.
- **Teamwork**
 - **What is this competency?** Working effectively with others by listening, sharing ideas, and compromising when needed.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Collaborate in group projects, divide work fairly, respect different working styles, and resolve conflicts calmly.
- **Professionalism**
 - **What is this competency?** Acting responsibly, ethically, and respectfully in academic and workplace settings.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Meet deadlines, proofread assignments, email professors and peers politely, show up prepared, and deliver reliable work.
- **Technology**
 - **What is this competency?** Using digital tools to communicate, solve problems, and complete tasks effectively.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Learn the course's online tools (Canvas, Google Docs, Zoom, AI where permitted, etc.), experiment with apps for studying or presenting, and ask for help when learning new technologies.
- **Equity & Inclusion**
 - **What is this competency?** Valuing different perspectives, treating people fairly, and recognizing how identity and culture shape experiences.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Listen respectfully during discussions, include diverse sources in research, reflect on fairness and access in course topics, and learn from classmates with different backgrounds.
- **Career and Self-Development**
 - **What is this competency?** Learning about career options, building new skills, and taking responsibility for my own growth and goals.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Take initiative in group projects, connect assignments to future career paths, ask professors or advisors about professional applications, and reflect on which course tasks strengthen my interests or abilities.
- **Leadership**
 - **What is this competency?** Guiding or motivating others toward a common goal, even if I'm not the official leader.
 - **How can I develop this competency in almost any course?** Take responsibility in group projects, help organize tasks, encourage participation from all teammates, and follow through on my commitments.

More information on career readiness can be found on the [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\) website](#) and [the NACE Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce PDF](#).

Example 2. Focused overview of four NACE Career Readiness Competencies

Career Ready, Day One at Miami University Regionals

This course is designed to help you build **career ready, day one skills and competencies** that are consistently valued across professions and workplace settings. The four competencies below come from NACE's (National Association of Colleges and Employers) most recent Job Outlook report and reflect skills that employers regularly identify as very or extremely important for recent graduates. The Job Outlook data also includes that these competencies continue to show notable gaps in proficiency from recent candidates. In short, the most important competencies for employers are also where they report seeing the biggest gaps in proficiency.

In courses at Miami University Regionals, you will further develop:

- **Communication** by clearly explaining ideas in writing, speaking, and digital formats for different audiences.
 - 98.7% of employers rated this competency as very or extremely important.
 - Only 55.4% of recent graduates were rated by employers as very or extremely proficient in this competency.
- **Teamwork** by collaborating effectively, sharing responsibility, and responding constructively to feedback.
 - 96.1% of employers rated this competency as very or extremely important.
 - 75% of recent graduates were rated by employers as very or extremely proficient in this competency.
- **Professionalism** by meeting deadlines, following course expectations, and communicating respectfully.
 - 94.1% of employers rated this competency as very or extremely important.
 - Only 54.7% of recent graduates were rated by employers as very or extremely proficient in this competency.
- **Critical Thinking** by analyzing information, evaluating evidence, and solving problems thoughtfully.
 - 93.5% of employers rated this competency as very or extremely important.
 - Only 50% of recent graduates were rated by employers as very or extremely proficient in this competency.

During this course, you should be able to identify, describe, and demonstrate relevant competencies and should be able to confidently explain not just *what* you learned, but *how* it prepares you for what comes next.

Example 3. Connecting to Career Readiness Assignment

Purpose

The goal of this assignment is to prompt you to think about how this course can help you develop skills for your current or future career.

Instructions

Open and read the [Career Readiness Outcomes](#) document to learn about career readiness competencies that employers seek, and information about whether or not they are finding that recent college graduates are proficient at these competencies. These competencies are skills that you can develop in all of your classes.

Consider which THREE of the listed competencies are most relevant and useful to your current/future career interests?

Write a college-level essay that addresses both of the following questions. Your essay should be 2 - 4 paragraphs long.

- Has this information shifted your opinion on how this course can be useful to your current/future career plans?
- Consider the three competencies you identified above. Why do you feel these are the most relevant skills for you? How will you consciously work to develop them in this course?

Submit

A Word document, PDF, or Google Doc. See the rubric for grading criteria.