Workforce Preparation

This Brief

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What Does It Mean to Have Workforce Preparation Skills?

Workforce preparation skills *means the knowledge, skills, and competencies that, when developed and demonstrated, prepare individuals to obtain or retain employment or to advance in the workforce. These skills include interpersonal and communication abilities such as teamwork, collaboration, and customer service; and workplace competencies including demonstrated professionalism, critical thinking, and systems thinking within their specific work setting.*

One of the primary goals of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is to support individuals' efforts in obtaining and retaining employment in high-quality jobs and careers. To this end, the legislation identifies and funds specific workforce preparation activities; namely, "activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in utilizing resources, using information, working with others, understanding systems, and obtaining skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of postsecondary education or training, or employment" (WIOA, Pub. L. 113-128, July 2014, Section 203, 17). Guidance on how to evaluate the programs that conduct

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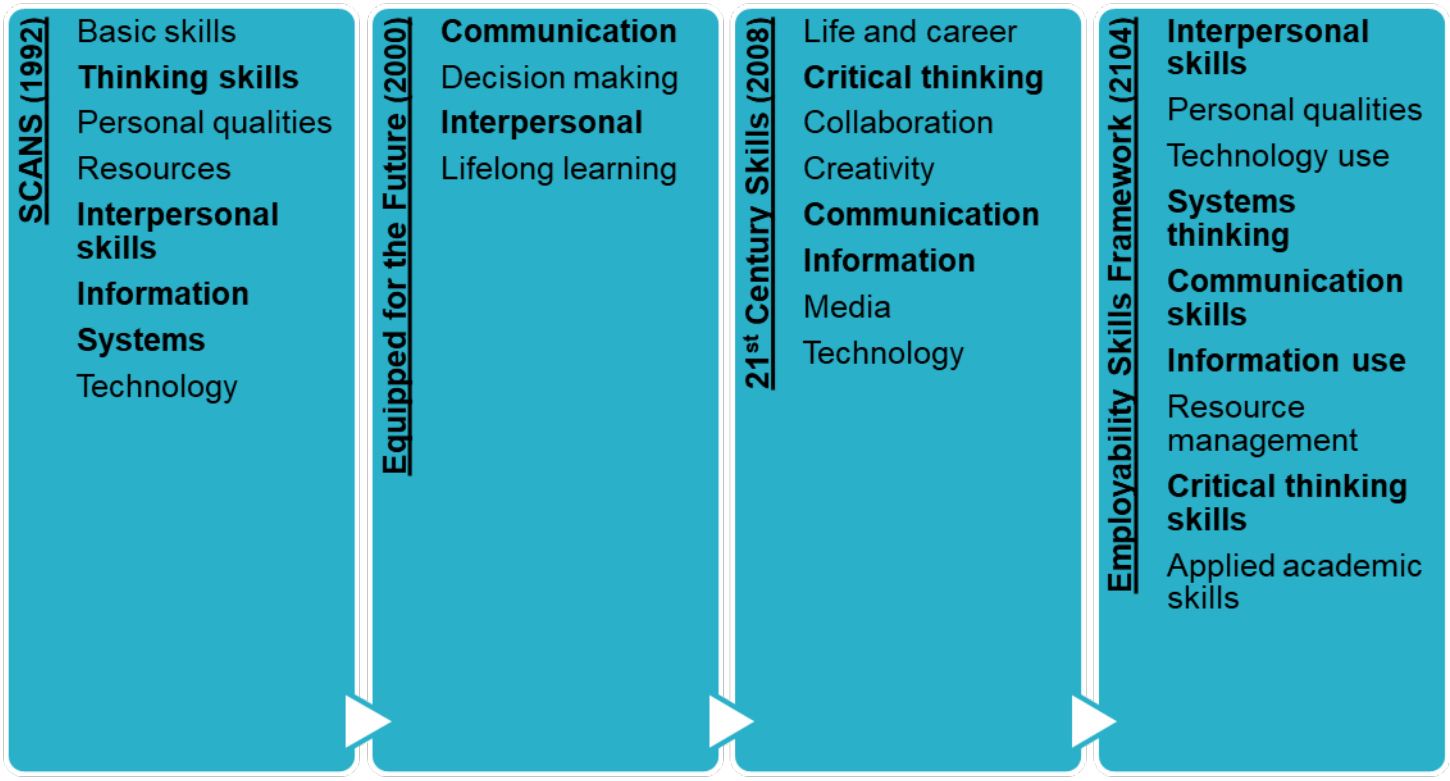
these activities is found in Section 116 of WIOA, and identifies indicators of performance accountability, among them measures for obtaining and retaining employment (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Pub. L. 113-128, July 2014).

The adult education system is well positioned to conduct these workforce preparation activities; adult education programs have been helping adult learners work to develop workforce preparation skills for decades, beginning with the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 (Job Training Partnership Act, Pub. L. 97–300, October 1982). Over this time, there have been many frameworks that identify workforce preparation skills, from the framework of the *SCANS Report for America 2000* (U.S. Department of Labor, 1992) to more recently the *Employability Skills Framework* (Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, 2019), as seen in Figure 1. In those frameworks and in the field, different phrases—such as employability skills, foundational skills, soft skills, or other terms—have been used when referring to these skills. However, they all describe a similar set of skills; that is, those that are necessary to successfully participate in the workforce.

Figure 1. Workforce Preparation Skills Frameworks over Time



Sources: Skills for SCANS identified from U.S. Department of Labor, 1992; skills for Equipped for the Future identified from Equipped for the Future, n.d.; skills for 21st Century Skills identified from Partnership for 21st Century Learning, a Network of Battelle for Kids, 2019; skills for Employability Skills Framework identified from Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, 2019

To help adults gain these important skills, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2013) recommends that programs designed to address basic skills should be linked to employment. In addition, formal and continuing educational programs should emphasize both "foundational skills" and soft skills because U.S. workers need both in their jobs (Liu & Fernandez, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2016). Further research suggests that a focus on practical tasks and the specific skills students need are key for workforce preparation to be effective (Laboissiere and Mourshed, 2017). One way to accomplish this is through problem- and project-based lessons, which provide opportunities for students to incorporate multiple workforce preparation skills and more efficiently gain the skills they need. Wrigley (2008) notes that these instructional approaches "can serve

as a powerful tool to prepare students for the world of work", especially because of the approaches' emphasis on collaboration and decision-making.

Why Is Workforce Preparation Important?

WIOA's emphasis on workforce preparation skills aligns closely with employers' priorities. These skills are cited as among the most important skills by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Specifically, 85% of employers rated oral communication as very important, 82% rated written communication as very important, and 81% rated critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills as very important (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Employees recognize the importance of these skills as well, with 89% of workers saying that good written and spoken communications skills are highly or very important, and 86% saying critical thinking skills are extremely or very important (Pew Research Center, 2016). Yet, Laboissiere and Mourshed (2017) describe a significant skills gap between the skills employers need their employees to have and the skills their employees do have, noting that "[a]lmost 60 percent [of American employers] complain of lack of preparation, even for entry-level jobs" (p. 2). The numbers behind this gap are striking: although there are 7.4 million job openings, 5.9 million people are unemployed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a, 2019b).

As a result, the outlook is good for those who have workforce preparation skills; there seems to be a positive correlation between having these skills and better hiring rates and success on the job (Lippman et al., 2015). As discussed above, employers place high value on workforce preparations skills and look for them in potential employees (Burnett & Jayaram, 2012; Cunningham & Villasenor, 2014). These skills also help one to retain their employment as well as workforce preparation skills have been shown to help avoid failure once on the job (Lindqvist & Vestman, 2011). Also promising is the growing body of research that suggests that workforce preparation skills may be just as important as academic or technical skills in predicting employment and earnings (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014; Lippman et al., 2015).

In working with students on these vital skills, it is important that they understand that workforce preparation skills are not career- or industry-specific skills (College and Career Readiness and Success Center, n.d.). No matter what type of employment students ultimately pursue, they will need these skills to be successful. Workforce preparation skills are a basic requirement of many entry-level jobs in all career pathways, with additional skills and competencies required for jobs building on those as responsibilities increase along the path. Resources that identify the workforce preparation skills needed for jobs are readily available. O*NET OnLine (https://www.onetonline.org/), for example, provides a plethora of career-related resources. The O*NET Job Summaries provide detailed lists of the workforce preparation skills required for most job titles. Together these resources can provide a foundation for the development of meaningful workforce preparation skills.

How Do You Implement the Skills That Matter for Workforce Preparation?

With a clear need for better alignment between education and workforce development to help fill this gap (Meyer, 2014), education in the U.S. has shifted over the last few years to help students acquire the workforce preparation skills needed to fill this gap (Care, Kim, Vista, & Anderson, 2019). Increasing, "educational programs and professional development trainings may seek to identify opportunities to improve both foundational and soft skills, as well as ways to do so among different groups of workers (e.g., those with low levels of numeracy proficiency)" (Liu & Fernandez, 2018). These skills, and an interpretation of how they are represented in the context of workforce preparation, are described below:

- **Critical thinking:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to identify problems and potential and effective solutions. In the classroom, students can examine the fluctuating price of gasoline and identify possible alternatives for transporting goods and services. For example, have students calculate miles per gallon of gasoline versus miles per gallon of ethanol and compare actual operating costs that could be associated with employment.
- **Communication:** Students must have the skills and knowledge needed to speak, listen, and write clearly so that they will be understood by supervisors and other coworkers. These skills also include nonverbal communication through body language. In the classroom, provide opportunities for students to role play situations that include exchanging information during a shift change in a manufacturing facility. Provide opportunities to exchange the information verbally and in written form.
- **Processing and analyzing information:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to consider facts and opinions, risks and benefits, and potential outcomes for decisions on the job. In the classroom, students can be introduced to a decision-making process that includes naming a workplace problem, identifying possible causes and solutions, conceptualizing potential outcomes, and comparing and contrasting solutions and outcomes.
- **Self-awareness:** Students must have the skills and knowledge needed to demonstrate how personal characteristics contribute to employability and job advancement. In the classroom, provide scenarios for debate. Divide the class into two groups: employers and employees. Instruct students to debate the practice of wearing body jewelry. Ask groups to prepare to defend their positions, with the employer group arguing against wearing body jewelry on the job and the employee group in favor of wearing body jewelry on the job.
- **Navigating systems:** Students must have the skills and knowledge needed to understand the workplace culture and its communication and decision-making structures. In the classroom, students might be asked to discuss the chain of command and its implications when presented with a potential safety issue on the job.
- **Adaptability and willingness to learn:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to learn and apply new skills and manage change so that they are able to perform effectively on the job. In the classroom, provide students with a service manual to introduce examples of skills they would need to be able to learn any new information or capability outlined in the manual.
- **Respecting differences and diversity:** Students must be able to respect differences among their coworkers and to interact in ways that demonstrate this respect. For example, introduce discussion questions that present opportunities for students to examine their ideas. Discussion topics may include the following: (1) Explain some ways that you can accept the roles of men and women in nontraditional jobs at your workplace; (2) describe how you would react to coworkers who wear clothing that reflects their diverse cultures or religious backgrounds; (3) recognize that many retirees are returning to the workplace, and consider if you would find it challenging or beneficial to work with formerly retired employees or with employees who are younger than you.
- **Interpersonal skills:** Students must have the skills and knowledge required to demonstrate essential social skills, such as cooperative interaction with others, so that they can perform their jobs successfully. For example, have students work in teams to assemble two identical three-dimensional bridges. After completing the activity, provide opportunities for students to reflect upon individual performance as well as team performance. It also is important to recognize students' abilities and willingness to take direction from others and/or to delegate responsibility as appropriate.

What Are Some Tips for Teaching Workforce Preparation Skills in Your Classroom?

- **Find a common language:** Research some of the existing workforce preparation frameworks and decide which instrument best meets your needs. Introduce the identified framework's skills to your students and be consistent with the language of the framework. The Employability Skills Framework, found at https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework, is one example.
- **Show relevance:** While workforce preparation skills are important in multiple contexts, be sure to specifically indicate why they are important in the workplace. Use O*NET Job Summaries at https://www.onetonline.org/ to provide real-life examples of workforce preparation skills associated with different jobs.
- **Be intentional when introducing and addressing these skills in your lessons:** Call out the skills as they are being introduced, practiced, and embedded and integrated into lessons. Provide resources and tools that will allow students to track their progress in the development of skills that they prioritize based on potential jobs or career paths.
- **Practice:** Provide ample opportunity for students to practice workforce preparation skills. There are many examples of ready-made curricular materials online.
- **Provide assessment and feedback:** Although workforce preparation skills can be difficult to measure, include creative assessment, feedback, and opportunities for students to demonstrate improvement and proficiency. An example of an assessment rubric can be found via the "Portfolio" link at https://dpi.wi.gov/cte/skills-standards/employability

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