Applied Skills Consortium

Program Guidelines
2021-2022

Proving the Value of a
Liberal Arts Education

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Introduction

The concept of the Applied Skills Program developed during a strategic planning discussion within the College of Liberal and Applied Arts at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA). The planning committee considered how students from liberal arts disciplines could demonstrate their professional skills to potential employers in an *objective* manner. Employers consistently report prioritizing skills that liberal arts graduates possess, yet liberal arts students often have trouble finding meaningful work immediately after college. Therefore, a gap seems to exist between the skills employers report they need and whom they eventually hire. In spite of this gap, studies find that liberal arts graduates eventually out-earn

The Applied Skills Program strives to validate the workplace readiness of liberal arts graduates.

most college majors.[1] Liberal arts graduates possess marketable skills but may not have a way of demonstrating them clearly to hiring organizations. The Applied Skills Program strives to validate the workplace readiness of liberal arts graduates.

SFA launched a pilot program during Spring 2018 semester in the form of an internship mentored by high-level business executives, who assessed the performance of students on seven skills relevant to the contemporary job market. In 2019, the program became a regional competition involving three institutions:

- Southern Arkansas University
- Stephen F. Austin State University
- University of North Texas

For the 2019-2020 academic year, the consortium expanded to include two additional institutions:

- Sam Houston State University
- Texas A&M University Corpus Christi

For the 2021-2022 academic year, the consortium expanded to include:

- University of Houston - Clear Lake

This handbook outlines the policies and procedures by which the consortium will operate during the 2021-2022 academic year. There is no doubt the competition among these institutions will continue to prove that a liberal arts education remains the best overall avenue to prepare students for the contemporary marketplace.

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[1] http://www.ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/liberal- arts-majors-unemployed/

Program Overview

The Applied Skills Program is a credit-bearing academic course that brings many of the benefits of an internship into the classroom. Students enroll at their home institution for a course appropriate to the program (e.g., an internship course). Throughout the semester, students interact with corporate partners and business mentors, gaining real-world experience and contacts.

Key components of the program include:
- A **sponsoring company** identifies a business problem that it currently faces.
- **Students** analyze the problem and propose solutions to the corporation's leadership.
- An **instructor** from each institution guides students through the process.
- Seasoned **business executives (mentors)**, recruited by each institution, assess student skills and program deliverables and verify whether a student is equipped to function effectively in the contemporary workplace.

Planning and recruiting begin in the Fall semester, and the program is implemented during the Spring semester. Each student is expected to create a business proposal in a two-step process:
1. Research the problem by creating an annotated bibliography and analysis of the problem.
2. Write a proposed solution accompanied by a PowerPoint poster of the solution.

After these two assignments, the business mentor(s) at each institution assess students individually on seven professional skills as well as their overall workplace readiness. The results of the assessments determine the top student at each institution who, in turn, advances to a regional competition. At this event, called the Boardroom, students in teams negotiate a common solution that is presented to the sponsoring company. The corporation's executives select the winning proposal and award cash prizes.

Timeline

Fall 2021	Administrative preparation, student and mentor recruitment	
Spring 2022	**January**	Student/mentor orientation at each institution
	February	Student/mentor meetings
	March	Student/mentor meetings
	Mid-March	First paper due
	Mid-April	Second paper due
	April 22	Solution posters/slides due
	TBD	Regional Competition

The Seven Skills

Aside from two written papers, assessment within the Applied Sills Program places a great deal of weight on the professional skills students demonstrate throughout the program. After all, these skills should prove liberal arts students are prepared for the contemporary workplace.

To determine which skills are most important to employers, the Consortium turned to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a membership organization that provides "information on the employment of the college educated, and forecasts hiring and trends in the job market; tracks starting salaries, recruiting and hiring practices, and student attitudes and outcomes; and identifies best practices and benchmarks."[2] The organization created a task force of college career advisors and human resources staff to develop a definition of "career readiness." The task force surveyed organizations that hire through university interviews and identified seven competencies that correlate with employment success:[3]

Competency	Percent of Respondents (rounded)
1. Professionalism/Work Ethic	98%
2. Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	96%
3. Oral/Written Communications	92%
4. Teamwork/Collaboration	90%
5. Information Technology Application	72%
6. Leadership	56%
7. Career Management	45%

The Applied Skills Consortium adapted these skills as follows:
1. NACE in 2017 added "Global/Intercultural Fluency" as an eighth competency.
2. "Career Management" was excluded because it is a lower priority that would be difficult to assess.
3. "Information technology application" was excluded since it, too, would be difficult to assess within the framework of the program.
4. "Oral/Written Communications" was subdivided into two separate skills (oral and written communication) because they measure distinct skills.

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[2] https://www.naceweb.org/about-us/index.aspx
[3] https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-competencies-employer-survey-results/

The Seven Applied Skills

Professionalism

Problem Solving

Oral Communication

Written Communication

Intercultural Fluency

Teamwork

Leadership

On-Campus Program

Fall semester

> **Course scheduling**: Each university creates a course to be offered in Spring semester that is appropriate to the program (e.g., an internship, special topics class).

> **Coordination of schedules**: The consortium's members agree upon a common day and time, to the extent feasible, during which students meet as a class.

> **Student recruitment**: Institutions recruit students to participate in the program. There is no enrollment threshold given institutional variations in the course being offered.

> **Mentor selection**: Each institution recruits one or more business mentors to work with students in developing their solution proposals.

> **Corporate sponsorship**: Arrangements are made with the corporate sponsor about its participation in the program.

Spring semester

Orientation: Each institution convenes an orientation for students enrolled in the program at the beginning of Spring semester. The faculty advisor conducts the meeting and covers the following topics:

1. Introduction of the mentor(s) from the local business community;
2. Discussion of how the mentor(s) will meet and communicate with students;
3. Explanation of the program, its requirements , and its expectations of students;
4. Presentation of the business problem;
5. Collection of student contact information;
6. Conversation between mentors and students to begin relationship-building.

Mentor meetings: Students meet face-to-face as a group with their mentor(s) at least bi-monthly. Additional one-on-one consultations are strongly encouraged at other times throughout the month for students to obtain guidance.

Assignments: Students must complete three assignments by specific deadlines. After each assignment, the mentor evaluates individual student performance and awards points. These results are cumulated for the semester and forwarded to the faculty advisor(s) for grading purposes.

Regional competition: The top performer from each institution competes in a "boardroom" presentation before the corporation's leadership.

Mentor Responsibilities

In many ways, mentors are the linchpin to the success of the Applied Skills Program because they carry the primary responsibility of evaluating student skill achievement. Mentors are expected to perform the following roles:

- Provide expertise from a professional perspective;

- Maintain availability to students on an as-needed basis;

- Visit students at least monthly to provide guidance and supervision;

- Keep in regular communication with students when not on campus;

- Advise students about corporate culture and performance expectations in a business environment;

- Act as a role model by demonstrating professional behavior;

- Communicate goals and expectations;

- Keep the faculty advisor informed on each student's progress;

Mentors carry the primary responsibility of evaluating student skill achievement. They must understand that the purpose of the program is to provide an educational experience.

- Convey concerns about a student's performance to the faculty advisor;

- Provide regular feedback to students on their performance;

- Complete evaluation forms in a timely manner;

- Conduct an exit interview with students to inform them about their strengths and weaknesses.

Above all, mentors must understand that the purpose of the program is to provide an educational experience. It is not enough that students are monitored closely; they must also learn in the process.

Program Assignments

The program requires students to compose two papers and deliver a poster presentation. Campus mentors are responsible for assessing the assignments. The final—and most important—assessment is how each student performed throughout the program on the seven applied skills sought by employers. The percentage for each assessment is provided in the table below:

Course Assessment Matrix	
Assignment	**Percentage**
First Paper	20%
Second Paper	30%
Poster Presentation	10%
Skills Assessment	40%
Program Total	**100%**

The highest performing student from each institution will advance to the Boardroom competition. Each institution determines for itself how assessment results translate into a grade for the course.

Each student creates his or her own bibliography and analysis of the problem presented by the corporation; this is not a group assignment. Upon completion, students assemble together with the campus mentor and faculty advisor to present their bibliography and analysis. They are questioned by fellow students, mentor(s), and faculty advisor about what they wrote.

The paper consists of two sections:

1. Annotated Bibliography

   - All sources must be **documented**.
   - Students must reference **at least six sources** relevant to the assigned business problem.
   - Each source must be **summarized in two to three sentences**.
   - The summary should **capture the thesis of the source** and any critical information drawn from it.

   The mentor(s) considers the following factors when evaluating annotated bibliographies:
   - **Quality of resources** cited.
   - **Relevance** of the resources to the problem under analysis.
   - **Professionalism** of the writing style.

2. Problem Analysis

   The second section requires students to analyze the workplace problem. The analysis must:
   - Be concise—no more than 1,000 words.
   - Be supported by solid evidence (authorities, reliable data/statistics, etc.).
   - Use the citation style appropriate to the student's discipline.

   The mentor(s) considers the following factors when evaluating the problem analysis:
   - Analysis of the **origin and impact of the problem** on the corporation.
   - Analysis of **why the problem is difficult to resolve**.
   - Explaining of **consequences** to the corporation if the problem is not tackled.
   - **Professionalism** of the writing style.

Assessment

The mentor assesses the paper on a **scale of 1 to 100**, with 1 being the lowest and 100 the highest. The mentor is expected to place great weight on whether a student's paper demonstrates an appropriate level of professionalism to step into a managerial position at a corporation.

The second paper requires students to propose a workable solution to the problem posed by the company. Each student creates his or her own solution paper; this again is not a group assignment. The second paper should be divided into two parts.

1. Executive summary
   - This section should be approximately 1,000 words in length.
   - The problem and proposed solution should be briefly outlined.

2. Research support
   - This section should be approximately 2,000 words in length.
   - Students should cite relevant literature supporting their proposed solution.
   - Sources should demonstrate that the proposed solution is backed by prior research.
   - Use the citation style appropriate to the student's discipline.

Prior to composing their papers, students will have an opportunity to ask questions of the corporation's leadership via Zoom. This consultation will involve the following steps:

1. Three questions, decided by the students from all participating institutions, will be gathered into a Google Docs document and supplied in advance to the corporate leadership team.
2. Students and corporate leaders will meet via Zoom, where the questions will be answered.
3. Students will have ten minutes to ask follow-up questions.
4. The Zoom session will be recorded for students unable to attend the discussion.
5. A second Zoom call a few days later will allow additional questions and ensure that all students have ample opportunity to interact with corporate leadership.
6. Mentors will have access to the Zoom recordings to evaluate the performance of their students.

Assessment

The mentor will assess the paper based on a **scale of 1 to 100**, with 1 being the lowest and 100 the highest. The assessment should focus on the following factors:
   - Feasibility of the solution
   - Logic supporting the solution
   - Implementation strategy
   - Research support for the proposal
   - Professionalism of the writing style

As before, the mentor(s) is expected to place a great deal of weight on whether a student's paper demonstrates an appropriate level of professionalism to step into a managerial position at a corporation.

Students should convert their proposed solution into a PowerPoint slide/poster that summarizes the main points of the solution. A combination of text and graphics should be used in the poster. Key components include:

- **Title** ....72-point type at the top of the poster/slide
- **Author's name/institution** ....Center, left, or right of the poster/slide
- **Body** ....27-point type
- **Works and references**: ....22-point type

Students should also include brief statements of **introduction, results, and conclusions**.

The template below illustrates how a poster should be formatted:

Main title:

Subtitle

Author

Student's Institution

Section Title:

Body text
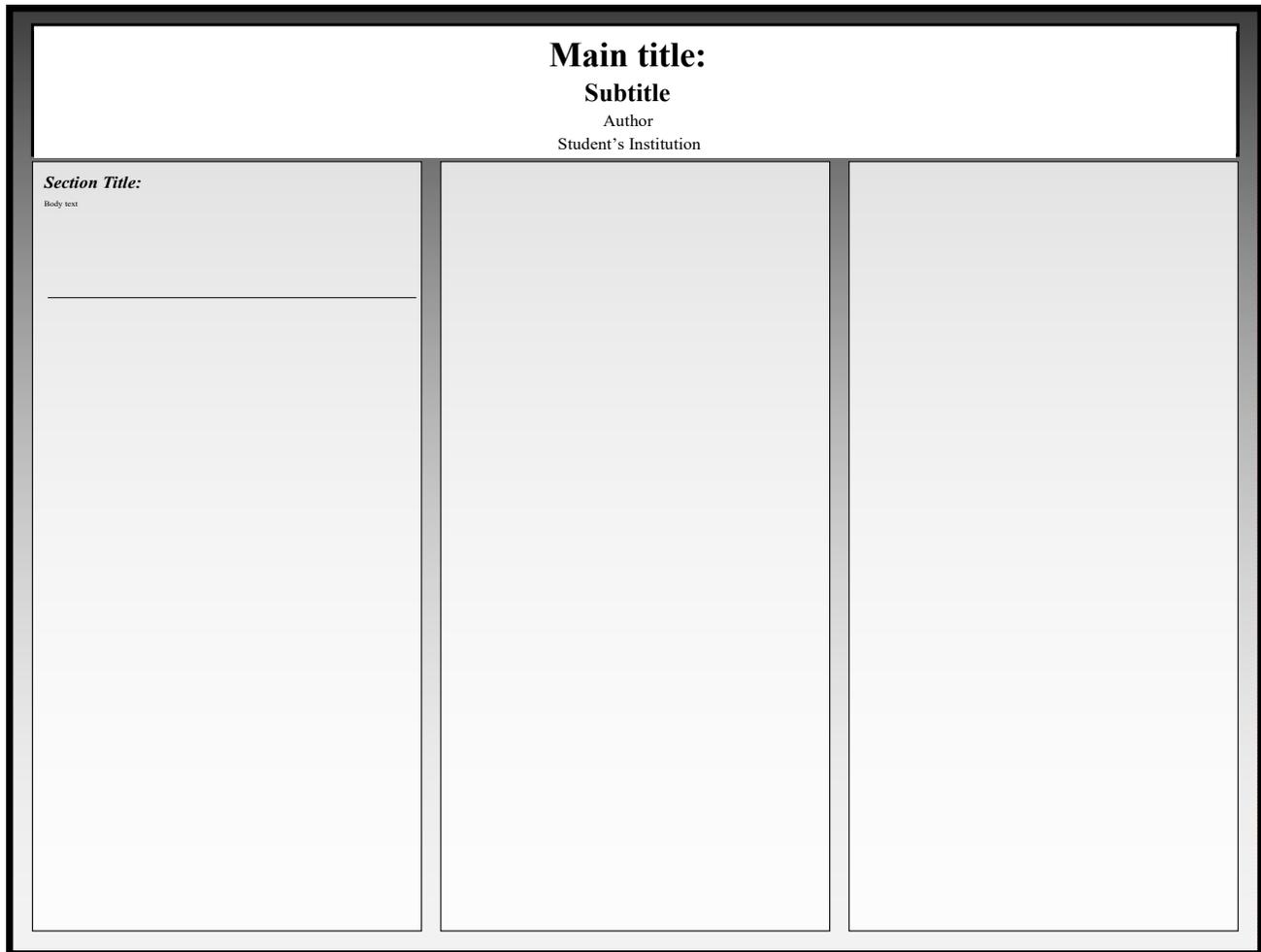
Presentation of Posters/Slides

Students will orally and visually present their posters to the other members of the class. The instructor and business mentor(s) should be in attendance as well. Classmates and mentors may interrupt to ask questions at any time during a presentation.

Assessment

The business mentor(s) will evaluate posters and interactions among the students. Assessment is based on a **scale of 1 to 100**, with 1 being the lowest and 100 the highest. The assessment should focus on:

- Effective communication of the solution
- Poster/slide layout
- Professional use of grammar and language mechanics
- Quality of the oral presentation
- Professional interactions with classmates

At the conclusion of the semester, campus mentors will evaluate students on the seven applied skills, as well as an overall assessment of their "workplace readiness." Each applied skill earns a student from 1-10 points, while the "workplace readiness" category accounts for another 1-30 points. Definitions and criteria are outlined below:

1. **Professionalism**: An individual's conduct and attitude in an office environment that contributes to workplace success.
   - Productivity
   - Initiative
   - Workplace habits
   - Efficient time management
   - Integrity
   - Excellence of work product
   - Relationships

2. **Problem-Solving:** The process of designing, evaluating, and implementing a strategy to overcome a dilemma or obstacle, or to achieve a desired goal.
   - Ability to comprehend problems
   - Evaluation of problems
   - Development of problem-solving strategies
   - Effectiveness of proposed solutions
   - Justification of solutions
   - Communication of solution

3. **Oral Communication**: The ability to persuade an audience through a spoken presentation with regard to an issue, concept, or problem.
   - Organization of presentation
   - Voice quality and pace of delivery
   - Mannerisms and body language
   - Professionalism and appearance
   - Rapport with audience
   - Use of media

4. **Written Communication:** The development and expression of ideas in writing.
   - Purpose defined
   - Content development
   - Organization
   - Analysis
   - Sources and evidence
   - Syntax and mechanics

5. **Intercultural Fluency**: The capacity to function and communicate effectively in an interconnected and diverse world.
   - Global perspective
   - Curiosity about cultural diversity
   - Sensitivity to diversity
   - Intercultural communication
   - Knowledge about cultural diversity

6. **Teamwork**: The ability to participate actively and cooperatively in a group to advance a common goal.
   - Cooperation with team members
   - Contributions to the team
   - Attitude
   - Response to conflict
   - Time management in meetings

7. **Leadership**: The ability to facilitate the achievement of a group objective.
   - Vision
   - Facilitation
   - Consensus-building/negotiation
   - Humility
   - Respectful attitude
   - Clear communication

In addition to the seven applied skills, mentors will assess the degree to which students are workplace-ready based on their professional judgments. The mentor can assign up to 30 points in making this assessment, with 1 being the lowest and 30 the highest.

8. **Workplace Readiness**: The degree to which an individual student is workplace-ready.
   - Creativity
   - Positive interpersonal relationships
   - Critical thinking
   - Maturity
   - Technical competence
   - Personal qualities

Applied Skills Program
Student Assessment Form
2021-2022

| Name of Student: |
| Name of Mentor Completing Evaluation: |
| Date: |

Please circle your assessment of how well a student performed on each skill. Specific criteria is found in *The Applied Skills Consortium Program Guidelines 2021-2022*.

	Lowest	Highest
1. Professionalism		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Problem-Solving		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Oral Communication		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Written Communication		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Intercultural Fluency		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Teamwork		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. Leadership		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please indicate the workplace readiness of this student. You may assign 1-30 points, with 1 being the lowest and 30 the highest.

8. Workplace Readiness   **1-30 points: _____**

TOTAL POINTS AWARDED THIS STUDENT   _____

The Boardroom Competition

Monday May 16, 2022

In-person or via Zoom, depending on the current public health situation

The top student from each institution advances to a regional competition known as The Boardroom Competition. Students who are not finalists are encouraged to watch the competition on Zoom. Whether the competition proceeds online or in person, the flow is the same, even if implementation varies slightly.

One week before the competition, each finalist submits his or her solution paper to the corporate leadership team. If the competition is held in-person, students should transform their PowerPoint poster/slide into a physical poster (3' high x 4' long), which will be displayed on the day of the event.

On the day of the event, students display their posters/slides for the corporate team to review and discuss with them.

Students are randomly assigned to two teams for the Boardroom Competition. Each team meets separately with the corporation's leadership while the other team is sequestered to prevent its members from overhearing the proceedings. The order in which the teams compete will be determined by a coin flip.

After the moderator introduces a team's members, the following sequence of events takes place:

- **Negotiation**: Students will have ten minutes to negotiate a consensus solution from the various proposals they developed individually.
- **A twist**: The moderator will announce a twist (i.e., a new dimension) to the business problem in an effort to test the students' ability to deal with fast-breaking developments and to think on their feet.
- **Proposal revision**: Students will have another ten minutes to revise their team's solution in light of the changed parameters of the problem.
- **Questions**: For the next 10 minutes, the moderator will guide students through a set of questions, challenging them to justify their answers. The corporate participants are also permitted to ask follow-up questions.

After both teams complete their boardroom discussions, corporate leadership will decide the individual student winner as well as the best team performance. In making these determinations, the solution papers, posters, and boardroom presentations will be considered. Cash prizes will be awarded at the conclusion of the event.

The Applied Skills Program:
The Boardroom Competition

Poster/Slide Review	
8:00-9:00	Company executives review posters/slides and interact with students

Program Overview	
9:00-9:15	Welcome and Introductions
9:15-9:20	The Liberal Arts and Workplace Readiness
9:20-9:30	Program Overview

Team A in Boardroom	
9:30-9:40	Team A students introduced by Moderator
9:40-9:50	Negotiation
9:50-9:55	Twist introduced
9:55-10:05	Team proposal revised
10:05-10:15	Moderator and corporation question students

—Break—

Team B in Boardroom	
10:30-10:40	Team B students introduced by Moderator
10:40-10:50	Negotiation
10:50-10:55	Twist introduced
10:55-11:05	Team proposal revised
11:05-11:15	Moderator and corporation question students

—Break—

The Decision	
11:30-11:35	Two teams return
11:35-11:49	Program winners (individual and team) announced
11:40-11:45	Closing remarks
12:00-1:00	Lunch (if competition is face-to-face)