



LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

Focus Groups Results

Community Perspectives on Columbus State
University Graduates

The Leadership Institute at Columbus State University

2/5/2016

Scope of Work

- 9 total Focus Group sessions held
 - 5 Community-Wide Sessions; 4 On-Site Sessions at TSYS (1), Aflac (2), and Synovus (1)
- 17 local organizations represented
 - Various sectors: Fortune 500 companies, business services, utilities, non-profit, education, legal, recreation, etc.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aflac ▪ Alexander Electric ▪ Carmike Cinemas ▪ Char-Broil ▪ Columbus Regional Hospitals ▪ Columbus Technical College ▪ Columbus Water Works ▪ Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Goodwill Industries of the Southern Rivers ▪ Greater Columbus, GA Chamber of Commerce ▪ Muscogee County School District ▪ Starrett-Bytewise Measurement Systems ▪ SunTrust Bank ▪ Synovus ▪ TSYS ▪ United Way ▪ WC Bradley ▪ Wright Legal Group
---	--
- **77 total participants**

Questions for Consideration

- Who or what influences your decision to hire a CSU graduate?
- Tell me about positive hiring experiences you've had with CSU graduates?
- Tell me about disappointments you've had with CSU graduates?
- What do you consider a barrier to hiring a CSU graduate?
- If you had to pick only one thing CSU could do to improve programs for students that made you want to hire them, what would it be?
- What skillsets/competencies are you looking for in a CSU graduate?
- What is the top skill you wish more CSU graduates had?
- What is the top skill you expect to see in a CSU graduate?
- Which field of study (degree programs) do you hire CSU graduates from?
- Does the type of degree matter for non-specialized jobs?
- Do you know who to contact when you have questions about hiring a CSU graduate for a specific position?
- Which of the following skillsets and competencies are mission-critical for you? Rank them in order of importance: Communication, Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, Collaboration
- On a scale of 1-5 (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest), how do CSU graduates rank on the following skillsets and competencies? Communication, Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, Collaboration

Emergent Themes

- **Who or what influences your decision to hire a CSU graduate?**
 - Professionalism – some have it, some don't.
 - Relevant outside-the-classroom experience, whether work, internships, or extra-curricular activities.
 - Local talent desirable – greater likelihood of retention instead of being a stepping-stone position, no relocation expenses, better understanding of local market
 - Partnerships with certain departments are mutually beneficial “try before you buy” opportunities for student and employer

- **Tell me about positive hiring experiences you've had with CSU graduates?**
 - Majors frequently mentioned in positive experiences: Accounting, Finance, Communication, Computer Science, Nursing, Education, Marketing
 - Most eager to do well, motivated
 - Internships/work-study programs key

- **Tell me about disappointments you've had with CSU graduates?**
 - Professionalism – inappropriate dress, poor resume & interviewing skills, sense of entitlement, “helicopter” parents
 - Soft skills need improvement– oral & written communication, conflict resolution, critical thinking, initiative
 - Organizational culture and fit – graduates don't take time to learn about and understand the organization they are applying to and whether or not it is a match of skill and values versus “landing any job”

- **What do you consider a barrier to hiring a CSU graduate?**
 - “Millennial mindset” – expectations do not match realities of entry-level positions. Graduates often come with the “What's In It For Me/How Will The Employer Adapt For ME” attitude, instead of “What Value Can I ADD For The Employer” attitude.
 - Poor resume skills – lack of attention to detail, no practical experience outside the classroom, irrelevant information
 - Poor interviewing skills – inappropriate dress, inability to demonstrate “what happens next” critical thinking, braggadocio rather than competent confidence (or alternatively, flat with no personality or ideas on how to contribute to organization)
 - Lack of business acumen – understanding of global economy, how specific position relates in context of organization at large,
 - Career Center not always responsive to placement/posting/hiring requests
 - No streamlined way to access qualified graduates - some know to contact Career Center, some have better luck utilizing network and reaching out to personal contacts within specific departments
 - Local economy – hard to keep attractive talent in key fields (i.e. Computer Science, advanced Accountancy/Finance) due to uncompetitive wages
 - Social media presence – unprofessional content

- **If you had to pick only one thing CSU could do to improve programs for students that made you want to hire them, what would it be?**
 - Expand internship and project-based learning partnership opportunities between CSU and the business community, across disciplines
 - Focused outreach to local businesses to place students in appropriate positions
 - Business etiquette and professionalism basics for all students
 - One Point of Contact for local businesses for placement/posting/hiring needs that truly understands the individual business mission, organizational culture, and needs
 - Improve people/soft skills, especially for more technical disciplines
 - Career path advising, early in collegiate career (Fr/So year, instead of Jr/Sr year)
 - Greater visibility of Business School – CSU well-regarded for Arts/Liberal Arts

- **What skillsets/competencies are you looking for in a CSU graduate?**
 - Basic computer, accounting and software skills (MS Office – to include functional spreadsheets in Excel)
 - Strong communication skills – verbal, non-verbal, and written
 - “Soft skills/Professional Mindset” – ability to build relationships, confidence without arrogance, enthusiasm and can-do attitude, flexibility and adaptability, business acumen and etiquette, strong work ethic, professional dress
 - Proactive instead of reactive
 - Analytical, critical thinkers
 - Coachability
 - Team players/can work well in teams

- **What is the top skill you wish more CSU graduates had?**
 - Professionalism – appropriate business attire, fully prepared for interviews/work, “grip & grin” skills, appropriate business communications (verbal & written)
 - Strong communication skills – verbal, non-verbal, and written
 - Work-ready attitude – “What value can I ADD to my employer” vs. “What will the employer do for me”
 - Outside the classroom experience – relevant work experience, internships, projects, etc. that allow students to practice key skills before being hired
 - Commitment/loyalty to the organization – taking time to understand organizational values, culture & fit for the individual, reducing turnover and hiring/training expenses
 - Understanding of diversity in the workplace – generational, racial, cultural, socio-economic, etc., and how that impacts a global workplace environment
 - Passion for the work, not just the paycheck
 - Lifelong learner
 - GRADUATE SCHOOL: Work experience of 1-2 years before applying for advanced certificates/degrees – makes coursework more meaningful and contributes to shared learning in the classroom

- **What is the top skill you expect to see in a CSU graduate?**
 - Technical skills/competencies
 - Effective interpersonal/communication skills
 - Critical thinking
 - Problem solving
 - Personal initiative/responsibility
 - Professional attire and demeanor
 - Teachable/coachable

- **Which field of study (degree programs) do you hire CSU graduates from?**
 - Business: General Business, Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Economics
 - Computer Science: MIS, CyberSecurity, “back end” coding, networking & systems (there is a strong need by employers for “front-end” developers)
 - Arts: Communication, Music (creative minds)
 - Letters & Sciences: Math, Statistics, Criminal Justice (under-explored opportunity here in fraud analysis)
 - Education & Health Professions: Education, Nursing

- **Does the type of degree matter for non-specialized jobs?**
 - Entry level positions – generally, not as important
 - Work history/internships/volunteer experience can help fill gaps
 - Some positions – degree/major IS critical
 - Some financial/accounting coursework helpful across industries

- **Do you know who to contact when you have questions about hiring a CSU graduate for a specific position?**
 - Mixed responses – can be highly dependent on hiring individual’s personal network
 - Some know to contact Career Center, with mixed satisfaction
 - Some know about participating in Career Fairs
 - Many reach out to personal contacts in departments – get better quality candidates this way
 - No formalized process perceived by business community for finding quality CSU graduates for hire
 - Job Placement Rates would be desirable information for recruiters
 - Being able to post available jobs directly to CSU website would be desirable

- **Which of the following skillsets and competencies are mission-critical for you? Rank them in order of importance: Communication, Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, Collaboration**
 - Depends on the organization and the position – all are important and interrelated
 - Communication and Critical Thinking/Problem Solving most frequently mentioned
 - Quantitative Reasoning critical for accounting and finance-related positions
 - Collaboration especially critical for Nursing
 - Suggested additional competency: GRIT – the ability to keep working on a situation until it is resolved

- **On a scale of 1-5 (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest), how do CSU graduates rank on the following skillsets and competencies? Communication, Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, Collaboration**
 - Hit or miss – depends on individual applicant
 - Quantitative Reasoning weakest link
 - Collaboration skills ok if they have prior work or project experience
 - Critical Thinking skills have room for improvement
 - Communication skills vary widely

Suggestions and Opportunities to Explore

- **Greatly expand opportunities for students to get exposure to “real life” before graduation**
 - Create more direct partnerships between departments and employers to streamline workforce development, akin to Computer Science/TSYS, Education/MCSD, Nursing/Local Hospitals
 - Project-based partnerships with employers, short-term (i.e. weeks, not months as with an Internship) – can be win-win
 - Encourage students to engage with campus life and extracurricular activities outside the classroom
 - “Polishing” (i.e. resumes, interviewing, professionalism, etc.) seems to be a HUGE gap in the quality of CSU graduates vs. graduates from other institutions. This is especially critical in highly technical fields, like Accounting and Computer Science.
 - Formalize program to expose students to professional behavior, attire, and etiquette – perhaps a Sophomore/Junior level seminar class, maybe non-credit; Senior year is far too late for this type of exposure
 - Integrate personality AND career aptitude assessments to help align academic goals with career goals before it’s “too late” in a student’s academic progression (i.e. Fr/So year)
 - Educate graduates on generational differences in the workplace, and equip them with strategies for success
 - Business community would welcome more opportunities to mentor and advise students for lifelong success
 - Consider “Meet and Greet” receptions for top students in different disciplines, all class levels, to build relationships with employers before applying for open positions
- **Improve tracking of key metrics related to employability of CSU Graduates**
 - Clarify Career Center’s role in employability of graduates after the students leave campus – Do they post jobs only? What about match candidates with positions? Are services only available to current students? What about alumni? What is the standard for communicating with employers (response time, services provided, etc.)?
 - Employment rates in a field related to degree within X years of graduation – Do we track such information? What is a reasonable goal for this data point?

- Placement rates from candidate inquiry to finalized hire – Do we track such information? What is a reasonable goal for this data point?
- Local retention – Are CSU Graduates finding employment in the Columbus area? Do we track such information? What is a reasonable goal for this data point?
- Create single points-of-contact (maybe at departmental levels, versus Career Center) that are very familiar with organizational culture and hiring needs of key employers, so they can better match qualified candidates with open positions
- Can Alumni Association be helpful in matching job opportunities with job candidates?

- **Integrate core competencies into curricula across disciplines**
 - Highlight project-based group work in courses
 - Students must practice professional communication across a variety of channels
 - Find ways to assess levels of critical thinking, even in 1000 level courses
 - Quantitative reasoning critical in making sound business decisions
 - “Soft Skills” lead the way – job-specific or technical skills can be taught fairly straightforward; attitude and motivation are not so easy

- Honors College to test pilot program integrating leadership and career development skills as an optional Endorsement starting Fall 2016 – could be a model for campus-wide program

- Increase availability of add-on certificate programs – non-credit is fine, as long as they meet industry standards

Key Areas of Need by Local Employers

- Mainframe Technology
- Cyber Security
- MIS – Risk Management
- Physical/Occupational Therapists (and Assistants)
- Structured internships
- Masters in Accountancy/CPA Exam Preparation
- Internal Auditing
- Special Needs educators
- Strong quantitative/data analysis skills
- Mental agility/flexibility for rapidly changing business environments
- Strong, effective communicators