

# Research Reports

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## ***BSU's Impact on Skills Valued by Graduates***

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### **Abstract**

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The purpose of this report is to relate what students valued from a college education and the extent to which they felt BSU had helped them grow in these areas. Graduates from 1992-93 and 1993-94 were asked to rate the importance of a series of 17 skills or abilities that individuals might hope to attain from going to college, then to rate the extent of impact BSU had in their attaining these skills.

### **Findings**

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- Graduates especially valued the ability to communicate (both orally and in writing) and to solve problems.
- BSU was perceived as most effective in improving written skills. About 80% agreed BSU had either a major or moderate impact in this area.
- Of the three most important skills, BSU had the least impact on oral communication with two-thirds of graduates rating BSU's impact as either major or moderate.
- Almost 75% of graduates thought BSU had impacted their development of problem-solving skills in either a major or moderate way.
- The skills that graduates valued most differed depending upon the major chosen by the graduate.
- Likewise, perceptions of BSU's impact varied from college to college.
- Graduates were least concerned with international and environmental issues.

## **BSU's Impact on Skills Valued by Graduates**

The conferring of a college degree symbolizes to most people that they have gained knowledge and skills that they did not have when they entered college. To some, it even symbolizes becoming an "education person." This transformation happens through the curricula that students

experience. As part of the process, colleges require their students to complete a certain set of general education courses believed to contribute to producing a well-rounded college graduate. Colleges have further requirements in the major aimed to develop a specific knowledge base, skills, and habits of mind.

In the past, this approach has been sufficient. But times have changed. In these days of accountability and quality improvement, colleges cannot simply assume that their courses of study are valid and sufficient or that they know what is best. Important stakeholders—students, employers, programs which receive our graduates—must be asked what they want and whether they are getting it.

The purpose of this report is to focus on a critical group of stakeholders—our graduates. Questions to be addressed included: What did the students themselves want from an education? What skills did they expect to develop that kept them in college and moving towards a college degree? Did they get what they expected? Did college impact them in ways they considered to be important?

To answer these questions, BSU graduates from 1992-93 and 1993-94 were asked to rate the importance of a series of 17 skills or abilities that might be attained from going to college. Graduates were also asked to rate the extent of impact BSU had in their attainment of these skills. The purpose of this report is to share these findings. Copies of the full survey and discussion of methodology can be found in Appendix A.

### What Did Graduates Value?

Though all skills listed were considered important by at least 70% of graduates, the top three in mean importance were written communication skills, oral communication skills, and problem-solving skills (see Table 1-8). The skills with the lowest mean importance rating were "understanding international issues" and "understanding the interaction of human beings and the environment." People-related skills such as "working cooperatively in groups," "getting along with people from various cultures, races, backgrounds, etc." and "developing and using effective leadership skills" fell in the mid-range of responses. It was interesting to note that graduates valued the general skills of communicating and problem-solving over specifics such as "developing the skills that employers need" and "learning about existing and emerging career options," especially since improving communication seldom shows up at the top of reasons freshman give for coming to college, whereas getting jobs and making money do.

Note that these findings are an aggregate that applies to graduates in general. A closer look reveals the skills that graduates valued most differed depending upon the major chosen. Arts and Sciences graduates agreed that using effective written skills and solving problems were very important, but added life-long learning as their third top skill (see Table 2). Business graduates agreed oral and written communication and problem-solving were the top skills to be acquired, but ordered them slightly differently so that oral communication had the number one position (see Table 3). Education graduates thought a commitment to life-long learning was the most important skill to attain, but followed that with the three selected by the University as a whole (see Table 4).

Health Science graduates had yet a different way to viewing important skills. They thought that living their personal and professional lives according to their own standards and ethics was the most important skill to develop, perhaps because of the emphasis in health programs on standards and ethics. Problem-solving remained in the top three listing, but it was followed by another new skill, "thinking objectively about beliefs, attitudes, and values." See Table 5 for further details.

Social Science and Public Affairs graduates selected effective oral communication as their top skill, followed by effective written communication. However, problem-solving moved to fourth place for this group, slightly behind thinking objectively about beliefs, attitudes, and values. See Table 6.

In the College of Technology, results were very different depending upon the type of degree granted. Those obtaining bachelors' and masters' degrees had a ranking that was almost identical to the University-wide ranking for top skills. Those in the shorter-term applied programs, however, thought it was most important to develop the skills that employers need. This was followed by being able to solve problems and to work cooperatively in groups. See Tables 7 and 8 for more details.

How Much Did BSU Impact the Development of Valued Skills? After rating the importance of various skills, graduates were then asked to indicate where BSU had a major, moderate, minor, or no impact at all in the attainment of each skill. Using a four-point scale, a mean impact rating was then calculated for each skill, with higher numbers indicating more impact. To assess how significant BSU's impact was, the percentage who indicated that BSU had either a "major" or "moderate" impact in their skill development was also calculated and reported.

BSU was perceived as most effective in improving written skills. This is good news since this was the skill that graduates thought was most important to acquire through college. About 80% of graduates thought that BSU had either a major or moderate impact in this area. Currently, this skill is addressed by requiring graduates to pass two courses in English and meet any written requirements in other courses.

For the remaining two skill areas that students rated most important, BSU's impact was perceived as somewhat less powerful. About two-thirds of graduates rated BSU's impact as either major or moderate in oral communication, while almost 75% rated BSU's impact as major or moderate in the area of problem-solving. Currently, neither oral communication or problem-solving are directly addressed in the core curriculum through specific courses. However, courses that include attention to problem-solving skills are being discussed as part of the proposed revisions to the core curriculum. Oral communication remains the prerogative of the departments and colleges.

There were only five skill areas that fewer than 50% of graduates thought BSU had impacted significantly. Four of these were also the bottom four skills in importance to graduates. The other skill—"living my personal and professional life according to my own standard/ethic"—was considered important by over 90% of graduates yet only 47% thought BSU had a major or moderate impact in this area.

Perceptions of BSU's impact on skill development varied from college to college. In the area of oral communication skills, for example, 78% of College of Education graduates and 72% of Social Science graduates thought BSU had impacted their skill development in either a major or moderate way. However, 66% of Business graduates and 62% of Arts and Sciences graduates thought BSU had a significant impact. For technology graduates with bachelors' or masters' degrees, 55% rated BSU as having had a major or moderate impact, perhaps because of the highly technical nature of much of the curriculum and because many students take their course work by computer (at least in Instructional Performance Technology) thereby making it more difficult to attend to oral communication skills.

Within most colleges, it was generally true that the skills graduates thought were most important were also those where they thought BSU had the most impact. In Arts and Sciences, the most important skill, using effective written skills, was also the area where they thought BSU had the most impact (78% thought BSU had a major or moderate impact). This was also true for Education. The three most important skills—lifelong learning, oral communication, and written communication—all had impact ratings of 78% to 80%. Only one other skill—working cooperatively in groups—had impact ratings that high. Social Science and Public Affairs graduates also gave the highest impact ratings to their three most important skills—oral communication, written communication, and objective thinking—with one exception for "accessing data from a variety of information sources," which fell in the mid-range in importance.

In the College of Technology, Applied Technology graduates also rated their most important skill—developing skills that employers need—as the one that BSU had impacted most. Graduates also thought, however, that several other skills had received more attention than the skills rated as second and third in importance. Bachelor's and master's graduates thought their top two skills—written communication and problem-solving—had been impacted more than any other skill. However, oral communication, ranked third in importance, fell below many other skills in impact ratings.

Graduates from two colleges—Health Science and Business—thought less important skills had more impact. In Business, the most important skill was oral communication which 66% of graduates thought BSU had impacted in either a major or moderate way. The skill area they thought BSU had impacted most was working cooperatively in groups, ranked eighth in importance. In Health Sciences, 55% of graduates thought BSU had a major or moderate impact on their most important skill area—living life by their own standard or ethic. The skills they thought BSU had the most impact on were working cooperatively in groups and using effective written skills, ranked eighth and ninth in importance.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

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BSU graduates hoped to gain many things from their educational experiences. Though every skill was considered of either major or moderate importance by at least 70% of graduates, the most valued were written and oral communication and problem-solving ability. For these three skills, BSU had the greatest impact in the area of written communication and least in oral communication.

The picture of what was most important for graduates to acquire, however, shifted when viewed through the lens of the college and thus the major. Though communication and problem-solving remained near the top in importance, other skills such as life-long learning and employability skills also emerged as top priorities in some colleges. Generally, the skills that graduates thought were most important were also the ones they thought BSU had impacted the most. There were exceptions, however, particularly in Business and Health Sciences.

These results offer a glimpse of what graduates think should be in the curriculum and how well it is currently being addressed. Graduates, however, could only respond to the smorgasbord of options they were given on the survey. As the University thinks further about what, if anything, should be done with these findings, perhaps the questioning process should begin with the items themselves. Does this list of skills accurately reflect what BSU hopes students will learn here? What are the student learning goals for the institution as a whole? Why are graduates required to take general education core courses? Answering these questions could help clarify what BSU believes to be of education value. Measures could then be developed to monitor how effectively BSU is meeting these goals, providing information that could be used for program improvement and establishing accountability to our students, our public, and ourselves.

## APPENDIX A

### SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The follow-up of graduates is a process implemented this year to provide information to departments, colleges, and university administrators on the success of BSU graduates and their perceptions of their BSU experience. The process will take place every other year and will include all graduates from the prior two years. This year, graduates from 1992-93 and 1993-94 were surveyed.

The process began in April with a review of several surveys that were already available (including the BSU survey administered in 1992). These were presented at the Deans' Council in May along with the request to notify the Coordinator of any particular data needs. A draft survey was then developed and distributed to Deans and Associate Deans for review. By mid-June, a finalized survey was ready for printing and mailing.

The survey was mailed the last of June along with a cover letter from BSU President, Charles Ruch, using addresses from an alumni file maintained by the Office of University Relations. In early August, a follow-up letter from the Coordinator of Institutional Assessment was sent. This was followed with a reminder postcard several weeks later. As shown below, based on the number of correct addresses, the response rate was 43%.

<i>Number of Surveys Mailed:</i>	3,358
<i>Number returned due to Incorrect Information:</i>	7
<i>Number of Surveys Returned:</i>	1,456
<i>Percentage of Delivered Surveys Returned:</i>	43%

The response rate differed depending on the College and program from which students received their degree. Only 29% of students in Applied Technology programs responded. The response rate for the other colleges ranged from 42% to 49%. See Table 13 for details.

This pattern of return indicates that some colleges and programs are over-represented in the general results. No attempt was made, however, to weight the responses, and findings are reported in simple percentages of the total number of responses.