

# **This We Believe About Teaching the Soft Skills: Human Relations, Self-Management, and Workplace Enhancement**

## **Policy Statement 67**

Students entering today's dynamic workplace must possess business-related, non-technical (soft) skills as well as technical competence. Success in the twenty-first century business environment is dependent on a refocus on skills that were emphasized in the twentieth century. More than ever before, merely being technically competent is not sufficient. To be successful in the global and diverse workplace, students must develop human relations, self-management, and workplace enhancement skills. Today's employees and entrepreneurs must have the ability to use and apply these skills in every phase of their work and lives. Even with increasing use of technology and a growing trend toward diverse worksites, students must understand the benefit of soft skills to their careers and personal lives. **We Believe That**, by teaching these soft skills, business educators have the opportunity to add significant value to their students' learning.

### **A Refocus**

Business educators have traditionally been successful in teaching the technical skills. While the technical skills are effective tools to accomplish a task, they must be complemented by the soft skills to enhance productivity. In the high-performance workplace, it is the *human factors* that impact the ability of organizations to succeed. Key components for success on the job include the attributes of human relations skills (e.g., positive attitude and teamwork skills), self-management skills (e.g., knowing how to learn and ethical behavior), and workplace enhancement skills (e.g., critical thinking and decision-making skills). Employers clamor for individuals who can work effectively with others, collaborate to solve problems, and manage work teams.

Students can learn these soft skills from different individuals in a variety of settings. Professional and community partners, parents and family, civic organizations, and the employment community all provide resources and settings for students to learn these skills. Business educators are the link between the school-based environment and the work-based environment through curriculum, student organizations, and business partnerships. At all educational levels, students and faculty must be held accountable for high standards in human relations, self-management, and workplace enhancement skills. **We Believe That** business educators are the leaders for ensuring that students develop these skills needed in business settings.

### **The Challenge**

When business educators refocus on the soft skills, several obstacles emerge. One is the perception that soft skills are

difficult to define, teach, and assess. Another obstacle is the attention given to technology that has tended to downplay the importance of these skills. In some cases, teaching these skills has been considered someone else's responsibility, adding to student and faculty apathy toward the necessity for these skills. Furthermore, a schism has evolved between the work-based and school-based environments regarding the soft skills. The business community seeks employees who can demonstrate positive application of these skills, while the educational community has not always sufficiently emphasized them. Attitudinal differences among generations about these skills have led to ambivalence about their importance. Technical skills must be complemented by well-developed soft skills. **We Believe That** business educators must overcome these obstacles to meet the challenge of preparing students for success in the workplace.

### **Learning Strategies**

Business educators must be proactive in setting high expectations and employing instructional strategies that will lead students to meet these expectations in both school-based and work-based learning environments. The school-based environment includes such strategies as modeling, portfolios, reflection, simulations, cooperative learning, and participation in student organizations.

- Modeling, including role playing, can provide students with examples of behavioral expectations of the workplace.
- Portfolios and reflection allow students to examine their progress toward developing these expected behaviors.
- Simulations and cooperative learning provide opportunities for students to experience situations similar to those they will encounter in their jobs and careers.
- Student organizations serve as a natural link between school-based and work-based experiences providing a forum for students to develop and demonstrate the soft skills.

Work-based opportunities such as business partnerships, cooperative work experience, and internships provide real-world observation and application of these skills. **We Believe That** business educators demonstrate commitment to helping students develop the soft skills necessary for success by providing these school-based, work-based, and student organization experiences.

### **Assessment**

One of the critical factors in assuring that students develop these skills is effective school-based and work-based assessment.

Assessments allow students to provide evidence of the extent to which they have mastered the soft skills. Alternative assessment formats include demonstration, portfolio development, checklists, rubrics, critical incidents analysis, and role-playing. These formats can be used in teacher, peer, self, and worksite/ employer-based assessments.

### **Commitment**

For business education to remain viable and relevant, the soft skills must be a major part of the curriculum. These skills must be emphasized in

- business teacher preparation programs
- curriculum development and instructional materials
- national, state, and local standards
- regular, systematic evaluation strategies
- student organization activities
- all school-based and work-based environments.

**We Believe That** business educators must engage in ongoing research for innovative and effective ways to teach and evaluate the soft skills. Further, **We Believe That** business educators must make a professional commitment to re-emphasizing the soft skills for student success in school-based and work-based environments. Through continuous involvement with the workplace environment, business educators will become aware of emerging uses of the soft skills that students need to develop. **We Believe That** business educators can and will add significant value to students' learning and to the business education profession through renewed emphasis on human relations, self-management, and workplace enhancement skills.