



From Academia  
to the Workforce:

# **NAVIGATING PERSISTENCE, AMBIGUITY, CHANGE AND CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE**

APLU Series on Employability Skills  
in Agriculture & Natural Resources

Pat Crawford  
Wendy Fink



ASSOCIATION OF  
PUBLIC &  
LAND-GRANT  
UNIVERSITIES



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*"The skills identified in this survey have a common thread of being in touch with reality and thriving in situations when, not if, the unexpected happens. They also emphasize the ability to connect with others and to approach employment with a mindset of growth." ~STUDENT*



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# APLU SERIES ON EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

One of the core missions of public universities is preparing students to enter the workforce. Understanding and meeting the needs of employers and the skills future alumni will take with them into the workplace is vital when developing curricula and degree programs.

In 2010, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities' (APLU) Academic Programs Section (APS)<sup>1</sup> commissioned research on specific employability skills—the nontechnical skills used every day in the workforce to ensure the smooth operation of projects and offices. Then, as now, academic administrators were responding to concerns from employers about new graduates' skills in leadership, professionalism, teamwork, self-management, decision making, and problem solving and communication. In order to redesign degree program curricula and co-curricular opportunities, administrators wanted to consider specific skills and experiences that could be provided to help students meet employer expectations.

The goal of the research was to provide data-driven insights on employers' needs that administrators and faculty could consider when changing or updating academic programs. Researchers settled on the primary question of “What employability (soft skills) are important for new graduates to succeed in the workplace?” They decided to explore the

question from the viewpoint of four stakeholders: employers, alumni, faculty and students.

Anecdotal evidence supported the idea that employers and faculty might view employability skills differently. The first survey was distributed nationally in 2011 through 31 participating universities and garnered 8,111 responses. The 2011 report on that survey's findings, “*Comparative Analysis of Soft Skills: What is Important for New Graduates?*” (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz) focused on identifying employability skill priorities. The study employed forced ranking of preferences, a technique used in marketing when all the items on a list are desirable, and the goal is to identify the most desirable (Vanette, 2019). The rankings provide valuable information for decision making when resources are limited, helping to target efforts for maximum effect. The final report is publicly accessible on the APLU website at: [www.aplu.org/Comparative-Analysis-of-Soft-Skills](http://www.aplu.org/Comparative-Analysis-of-Soft-Skills)

Following release of the 2011 study, several institutions attempted to implement the findings into their curriculum. Additionally, other researchers continued exploring the employability skills identified as most important, including testing teaching methods for targeted skills or looking for disciplinary differences in employability skills.





APLU initiated discussions of a second round of survey work in 2017. The previous employability skills identification and ranking created a solid foundation for a deeper dive into the gap between importance of selected employability skills of new employees and how well universities were preparing students with those skills. Areas of rising concern included new employees' ability to navigate persistence, ambiguity, change, and conflict in the workplace. These were addressed through open ended questions.

Again, college faculty and administrators determined that gathering perceptions at a national scale across stakeholder groups was critical to unearthing curricular and co-curricular implications that could be accepted by diverse universities. The survey was distributed in 2018–2019 through 31 APLU member participating universities, Agricultural Futures of America (AFA) and AgCareers.com, garnering 11,428 responses.

This data is collectively presented in two reports. This report, *From Academia to the Workforce: Navigating Persistence, Ambiguity, Change and Conflict in the Workplace*, is a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions. The second report, *From Academia to the Workforce: Critical Growth Areas for Students Today*, focuses on the quantitative data and gap analysis.

While the study was primarily focused on employers, faculty, alumni, and students from colleges of agriculture, the skills and preparedness gaps are not limited to these academic programs. Employers in the survey represented industry beyond traditional agriculture and natural resources and the skills that were examined are applicable to virtually all fields.

Much remains to be examined, particularly with respect to how to incorporate these results into formal and informal teaching settings. Further, more exploration and collaboration are needed to strengthen the relationships between academia and employers to improve the transition of new graduates to employment.

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1. APS is a Section of the Board on Agriculture Assembly, a national organization of public university colleges of agriculture.



# METHOD & CODEBOOK DEVELOPMENT

In 2017 the APLU APS created a survey sub-committee to explore the employability skills work next steps. The 13 person sub-committee included representation from APLU APS, Agriculture Future of America (AFA), AgCareers.com, National FFA Foundation, and six APLU member universities. The team revisited the topic of employability skills to take a quantitative look across the stakeholder groups, both at the importance of each particular skill and the preparedness of new graduates in that skill. Determining which skills to focus on for the new study was derived from a review of three sources: 1) skills identified in the 2011 survey and committee discussions, (skills listed in Table 1), 2) data mining and coding of the 2011 open-ended questions about which skills respondents did not learn while in University (Smith, 2017) and 3) a targeted deans and employers survey with academic associate deans and employers ranking the importance and preparedness of the 2011 skills. While most of the skills would be explored via a second quantitative survey rating skills for importance and preparedness of new graduates in those skills, the committee chose to take a qualitative deeper dive into four skills that were identified as rising concerns for employers:

- Ability to **persist** in a new job,
- Dealing with **ambiguity** in job tasks and workplace expectations,

- Dealing with the pace and content of **change** in the workplace, and
- How to manage **conflict** in the workplace.

The survey sub-committee participated in creating an online survey using Qualtrics software. Participation in the survey was received from students, faculty, and alumni of 31 universities across the nation. To capture the employer's voice, the survey was distributed to employers through AgCareers.com, Agriculture Future of America (AFA), and APLU in addition to employers connected to the participating universities. The survey received 11,428 responses with a good distribution across stakeholders: 24% from employers, 42% from alumni, 12% from faculty, and 22% from students.

It was overwhelmingly clear that the topic of improving employability skills is a genuine real-world concern for survey respondents. Participants spoke candidly, creating a dataset that included 23,552 narrated responses, amassing 1,238 pages of single spaced 10-point font text. There were 6,343 narrated responses to the question regarding persistence, 5,408 regarding ambiguity, 5,880 regarding change, and 5,921 regarding conflict.



**Table 1: Employability/Soft Skill Ranking by Employers (2011)**

### 1. COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

- Listen effectively
- Communicate accurately and concisely
- Effective oral communications
- Communicate pleasantly and professionally
- Effective written communications
- Ask good questions
- Communicate appropriately and professionally using social media

### 2. DECISION MAKING / PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS:

- Identify and analyze problems
- Take effective and appropriate action
- Realize the effect of decisions
- Creative and have innovative solutions
- Transfer knowledge across situations
- Engage in life-long learning
- Think abstractly about problems

### 3. SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS:

- Efficient and effective work habits
- Self-starting
- Well-developed ethic, integrity and loyalty
- Sense of urgency to complete tasks
- Work well under pressure
- Adapt and apply appropriate technology
- Dedication to continued professional development

### 4. TEAMWORK SKILLS:

- Productive as a team member
- Positive and encouraging attitude
- Punctual and meets deadlines
- Maintains accountability to the team
- Work with multiple approaches
- Aware and sensitive to diversity
- Share ideas to multiple audiences

### 5. PROFESSIONALISM SKILLS:

- Effective relationships with customers, businesses and the public
- Accept critique and direction in the workplace
- Trustworthy with sensitive information
- Understand role, realistic career expectations
- Deal effectively with ambiguity
- Maintain appropriate decorum and demeanor
- Select mentor and acceptance of advice

### 6. EXPERIENCES:

- Related work or internship experiences
- Teamwork experiences
- Leadership experiences
- Project management experiences
- Cross disciplinary experiences
- Community engagement experiences
- International experiences

### 7. LEADERSHIP SKILLS:

- See the “big picture” and think strategically
- Recognize when to lead and when to follow
- Respect and acknowledge others’ contributions
- Recognize and deal constructively with conflict
- Build professional relationships
- Motivate and lead others
- Recognize change is needed and lead the change effort

Creating the codebook for the qualitative data was undertaken by a nine-member team selected to bring diverse viewpoints to the work. The coding team included administrators, faculty, and students with expertise in agriculture, post-secondary education, institutional assessment, communications, social sciences, mathematics, data visualization, organizational psychology, and sociology. The codebook team identified re-occurring themes within the data to create a codebook for the analysis process. Team members reviewed a randomly selected 50-page sample (unique for each member) of the narrative responses to identify key themes and concepts across the full data set. Together the team sorted all of the emerging themes, concepts, and ideas that arose from the data, and using NVivo software, created a codebook for the analysis. The codebook was piloted using the data regarding persistence in the workplace and then refined and used to analyze and interpret the full data set for persistence, ambiguity, change, and conflict.

Eleven code themes were identified across the survey responses:

### **1. LIFE TRANSITIONS**

Life transitions include changes in the physical environment (from high school to college, college to first job) and the accompanying different expectations and values; comprehending a career (not just a job) as a trajectory with steps, growth, and change along the way; and the expectations of accountability and responsibility associated with adulthood and individual independence.

### **2. ORIENTATION TO THE WORKPLACE**

Orientation to the workplace includes understanding the structure of the workplace, such as chain of command, boundaries, and importance of task and role within the company; and understanding the framework of the organization including mission, goals, history, role in the marketplace, and institutional memory.

### **3. COPING SKILLS**

Coping skills include a host of self-management techniques to get through a situation or feeling, such as breaking a task down into manageable parts, setting realistic goals and sticking with a project to the end, managing perfectionism or fear, being willing to fail and try again, and managing stress. Coping adaptation is expressed as self-growth and more complex coping responses such as comfort in what cannot be controlled; flexibility; seeing value in diversity, change, and ambiguity; and recognizing the pace of change in the real world.

### **4. INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER QUALITIES**

Individual character qualities are broad terms used to express qualities of a well-rounded employee such as patience, passion, confidence, empathy, respect, courage, emotional maturity, and open-mindedness.

### **5. RELATIONSHIPS**

Relationships include understanding the organizational social systems through appropriate relationships with peers and coworkers at all levels in the organization, superiors;



and the appropriate, healthy, role and selection of mentors in the workplace with peers and superiors.

#### **6. CLARIFYING INFORMATION**

Clarifying information includes knowing when to ask questions and asking the right questions; using resources for additional, clarifying or supporting information, cross-checking with multiple resources, and evaluating resource reliability; and connecting information across data sources and situations.

#### **7. DECISION-MAKING SKILLS**

Decision-making skills are an evolving approach to decision-making from novice to expert; working with incomplete information, taking into account how priorities influence the decision path, managing diverse viewpoints, discerning the best approach from multiple options, and deciding when to act.

#### **8. CONFLICT**

Conflict awareness includes recognizing the emotions of conflict, individual responses to conflict, identifying degrees of conflict (minor to serious), checking assumptions, and discerning between task conflict and interpersonal conflict. Conflict management is being situationally alert, listening to diverse viewpoints, having difficult conversations, and seeing conflict as a constructive force. (Comments connecting to conflict were found throughout the responses, not just those in response to the conflict question, and intentionally included as a code theme for the analysis of the full data set.)

#### **9. KNOWLEDGE EVOLUTION**

Knowledge evolution includes acquisition of foundational knowledge in a field, developing specialized knowledge within a field and expanding the breadth of knowledge; acknowledging limitations of one's knowledge and perspective and the needs to continue knowledge acquisition over time; and expanding individual knowledge to new disciplines or fields and working in multi-disciplinary teams.

#### **10. INDEPENDENT THINKING PROCESSES**

Independent thinking processes include using critical thinking to reach a logical conclusion and creative thinking to see things in a new way; emotional and social intelligence to navigate the work environment; and approaching learning with a growth mindset and questioning of information or source validity.

#### **11. EXPERIENCES**

Experiences represent a wide range of 'doing.' Sub-codes include working (anywhere, career related, internships), international travel, research with a mentor, extra-curricular activities (student government, clubs, career or field related groups, activism, volunteerism, sports, performing arts, ROTC), bringing real-world into the classroom (team projects, speakers, authentic learning projects), breath of coursework (liberal arts, business, social sciences, languages) and stretch learning experiences.



*“... We must teach students to search, discover, get comfortable with ‘no’ or ‘try again’ and continue to search and discover until they find the answer. They need to understand that sometimes working is like being on a treasure or scavenger hunt. You have to go to a number of places before you get the prize.”*

*~EMPLOYER*



# PERSISTENCE



# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

## Persistence, Ambiguity, Change, and Conflict

### Navigating Persistence in the Workplace

Persistence, with any activity, sport, club, or job can be a challenge. This is especially true when expectations are not tempered with reality. A professional athlete makes a catch, pass, or shot look effortless. The real story, though, is in the countless hours of practice, repeated failed attempts, and 'starting at the bottom' with each new team.

To gain insight into how persistence is cultivated, the research team asked respondents the following question: "Students idealization of their first post-college job and the reality of that job can be quite different. It can be difficult to remain persistent and stick with the job through the early bumps and challenges. How can skills to build persistence be honed in formal or informal settings before beginning a professional career?"

The combined responses from employers, alumni, students, and faculty unmasked five key themes to foster new graduate's workplace persistence.

#### PERSISTENCE THEME 1:

##### *Orientation to the workplace – Expectations and attitude.*

Sometimes even a dream job feels a lot like work. Realistic expectations can lay the groundwork for persistence and a positive outlook towards work. It is helpful to "*realize that 'the real world' is full of trenches where much of the work is still done, without much of the glamour and glitz. However, your transition into this world is critical, learning how to observe, evaluate, and recommend without offending. Be helpful and persistent and you will be included.*" ~Alumni

Respondents indicated that career and entry level salary expectations provided at university could help close the information gap. "*Create realistic expectations for what jobs are out there, how much you can expect to be paid, and how far that money will go. It is very sobering to realize that the majority of jobs that I am qualified for tend to pay less than \$30,000 per year, and even more sobering to realize how little that is.*" ~Student

Fostering realistic expectations requires continuously researching the job market to identify the types of jobs currently available for new graduates, what type of tasks the jobs entail, and how much money entry level employees can anticipate earning. Students can take this task on of their own initiative or it could be posed as a practical





assignment for students. The job market changes over time, staying current and bringing in new alumni or industry representatives to share information with students can help them create more realistic decisions regarding their career goals and plans.

Realistic expectations can be extended to sharing information about the current professional culture, ensuring that students are aware that as an employee there will likely be even more expectations than there were in school. Attending college can be a casual experience for many students when compared to the work environment. Every job will have attire requirements, professional standards, rules, policies, and schedules that must be followed. To add to the challenge, many of these expectations may not be as clear as they were in school as they may be more of an unspoken code, something that the employer assumes their new employee has already learned or will learn quickly.


New employees should expect that they will be told “no” at times; their request for time off may be denied or their idea may not be the one selected. They must have the emotional intelligence to accept this and be able to move forward. *“Being told ‘no’ is a reality in the real business world. Students should be told to expect to hear the word ‘no’ and not take it personally. I have heard ‘no one listens to me’ and ‘it doesn’t matter what I say or do’ many times from new graduates/employees.” ~Employer* This is a conversation that can start at the college level by having discussions about other factors that affect employers’ decisions and demonstrating how to look for and accept those. For example, factors such as staffing, costs, or regulations may make a suggestion unfeasible. Further, entry level employees will not always be

privy to the reasons or full explanation of corporate or upper management decisions.


In general, university academic programs are designed to prepare students with content knowledge and appropriate technical skills for a student’s chosen field of study, giving them a knowledge and technical foundation that will carry them towards a mid-level job. While this may mean that an agronomy major dives deeply into soil microbiology and its impacts on plant growth or an entomology major may learn about pine bark beetles and their effect on forest health, it does not automatically give them expertise in customer service, office politics, dealing with difficult personalities, or overcoming their own shortcomings. *“Students need to understand that a degree, particularly a bachelor’s is not about becoming an expert in the field in four years, it’s about building a base of knowledge that says to the world ‘I am ready to begin working.’ A successful career in a field involves a lifetime of learning and development. Students need to understand that they are being made ready to start working in their chosen field which is where they really learn to be productive and to contribute.” ~Alumni*

Information gathered by speaking with recent alumni about their employment journey can be enlightening. *“Find someone who has succeeded in the role you might want one day and ask them how they did it. Many will tell you they had set backs, were loyal to the mission, respectful to management, produced during the hard times with no recognition, developed contacts and outlasted others who quit or gave up.” ~Alumni* Job shadows, speaker series, and course guest speakers are potential ways to generate conversations about the promises and





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challenges in a career pathway. *“Internships and early field experiences that include purposeful reflection on the experience will help students have realistic expectations in their first job.”*

~Faculty This awareness will open student’s minds to seeing the overall blueprint: where they will begin their career, where they want their career to take them, and how to achieve those goals.

## **PERSISTENCE THEME 2:**

### *Life transitions – Proving grounds and growing up.*

Students understand that achieving their degree is an important step in their career trajectory; nevertheless, it is only one of the many steps in the process. Beginning a new career involves building from the ground up. *“New employees need to be prepared to start at a lower level coming out of college and learning from the ground up. I think the idea of getting your foot in the door and proving yourself has lost its importance and could be reinforced in college.” ~Alumni*

As the alumni in the previous quote alluded, the concept of entry-level employment as a proving ground has eroded for some recent graduates. *“Many students at R-1 schools or elite schools got there because they have family situations where*

*parents buffer them from hardship (such as poverty, hunger, etc). I think that many students get used to things being rosy and don’t realize the privilege they have enjoyed. [And this does not] prepare them to be low man on the totem pole.” ~Student*

By recognizing that students arrive at university from a wide range of personal and family backgrounds, universities can play an active role in this fundamental time of growth for young people. This transition is a time for learning independence, personal responsibility, and financial management. Several respondents shared that it cannot be assumed these skills were learned at home. *“There should be courses that deal with practical day-to-day events like writing a personal check, understanding job search process, renting or buying an apartment or home, navigating the city transportation, dealing with people in conflict at home or at the workplace, how to do basic cooking or sewing, etc. They could be courses with the option for a Pass/Fail grade so students are not stressed out about their letter grades when they are learning real practical day-to-day skills.” ~Alumni* These skills can be taught through courses or other university sponsored activities. Learning these skills prior to entering the workforce enables new employees to apply more of their focus towards learning the job, as many of their basic life skills will have already been established.




As with the transition from high school to college, there is a significant adjustment from college to the workforce. One major change from academia to the workforce is a shift in the focus of goals. In education, goals are predominantly internal or independent goals for each individual student: an individual's grades, an individual's learning experiences, and an individual's degree. In the workforce, the environment is different; the goals focus on the needs of the organization. An employer expressed the importance of group performance over individual performance by suggesting "... course projects where individual grades are based on group performance. This is the reality of work place environments. Individual efforts count, but group or organizational performance is what matters. Students must be aware that individual high performance in a failing organization is not a success. Helping a group to perform well is a necessary and under rated skill. It is also difficult and requires persistence." ~Employer


Another significant change for new graduates is that goals and objectives are no longer captured on a syllabus. As one alumni responded, "I do remember my biggest adjustment was dealing with the nebulousness of the workplace. Prior to my first post-college (including graduate school) job, all expectations were neatly encapsulated on a syllabus. Here is what you need to be successful and here is when you need to do it by." ~Alumni Teaching and practicing skills such as project planning, time management and goal setting can assist students with the transition to the workforce and being able to be the writer of their own "syllabus."

Recognizing difference in the reward systems between academia and the workforce is an additional challenge to persistence in the workplace. In academia rewards are often consistent and visible,

such as a grade on a project, passing a class or advancement from sophomore to junior status. With the change from student to employee, the rewards become significantly more subtle and may take more time than a 'semester' to see the rewards. "Persistence requires reward. Some can see the reward or find the reward; some can't." ~Faculty In the work setting, rewards are more than increases in salary or promotions. Rewards are recognition for a job well done, being included in more complicated projects, and being given more responsibility. A valuable lesson for students is how to view their future career in a holistic way, understanding that sometimes the reward is the service provided and contributions may seem to go unnoticed. "Demonstrate your value, skillset, and willingness to take on undesirable tasks and eventually you will likely be rewarded." ~Alumni



***"Students, especially top students, need to be challenged to stretch their capacity so that they learn that failure is OK and it is perhaps the most effective learning/growing tool." ~FACULTY***



### PERSISTENCE THEME 3:

#### *Coping and adaptation – Facing failure and self-managing.*

Allowing students to fail can be a source of very powerful lessons. Learning to work through failures and redoing tasks based on input from a superior came up often in the survey responses. *“Let them experience the difficulties of ‘failing’ already at the college level. Learning to deal with failure is a fundamental skill, and they should be exposed earlier.” ~Faculty*

In particular, students for whom learning has come easily, struggling or failure of a task or assignment can be an unfamiliar experience. *“Students, especially top students, need to be challenged to stretch their capacity so that they learn that failure is OK and it is perhaps the most effective learning/growing tool.” ~Faculty* If students fail or have room for improvement, allowing them to learn the lesson again or repeat an assignment mirrors the work environment. In the workplace, when a task is completed, if the work is not satisfactory, employees are not given the option to simply move on to the next task. They receive feedback and are expected to improve upon their work by doing it again. *“I think that working through ‘No’ is important. ‘Try again’ is just as important. I feel that many of these students haven’t heard either statement often enough and therefore, struggle with that persistence. There is a certain expectation that they will be handed everything they need/want. We must teach students to search, discover, get comfortable with no or try again and continue to search and discover until they find the answer. They need to understand that*

*sometimes working is like being on a treasure or scavenger hunt. You have to go to a number of places before you get the prize.” ~Employer*

Setting goals, fostering the spirit of achievement, and developing skills to work through setbacks are effective ways to improve persistence. *“I think setting and obtaining goals is key to understanding that life rarely has a linear path and one must be able to adapt, persist, and overcome. I also think failure is key to setting perspective – it’s ok to fail, but what do you do when you fail – how do you handle it? Quit? Or persist and keep moving forward. I think seminar series or focus groups that deal with this issue would be helpful.” ~Alumni* Discussing careers as a pathway can help students understand that succeeding in their entry level position is a key part of progressing toward their mid- and long-term career goals.

An alumni respondent brought up the concept of two degrees of failure. *“Teaching students how to accept and learn from failure. Not failure because you didn’t show up for work, but failure when the project didn’t work out or was not accepted by management to go forward.” ~Alumni* There is a significant difference in failing because you let down your team and failing because something did not work as planned or a project was dismissed. Both types of failure may arise, and individuals benefit by learning how to handle each type of failure as early as possible while the risks are lower. Having experiences that are perceived as a failure develop the ability to identify one’s own responsibility in the outcome, recognize when the failure was not personal, learn from the experience, and move forward.



The growth mindset approach is a natural fit for education and workplace environments. The term growth mindset, coined by Dr. Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, (2006) refers to an individual's belief that learning can occur through dedication and hard work. Embracing a growth mindset and experiencing firsthand that they can learn by applying themselves can be a powerful confidence boost for students. *"Accepting roles and activities that push your comfort levels and knowledge/skills requires individuals to persist through those 'barriers' in order to achieve the goals. While remaining in an individual's comfort zone and doing only what is familiar is normally the preference, I would encourage individuals to take on new challenges, knowing that it will not be easy but the knowledge, skills and connections gained will benefit the participant."* ~Alumni

#### **PERSISTENCE THEME 4:**

##### ***Relationships and mentoring – Getting a workplace mentor, not a substitute parent.***

Employers in particular emphasized having a mentor as a way to build persistence. *"Mentoring is key. Every college student should hear from respected/trusted faculty members about how important it is to finish what you start, and to push through even when the going gets hard. And, that getting work done well and on time is critical to successful job performance."* ~Employer

Student and faculty respondents talked about the importance of having a mentor, as described above, rather than a parental figure who solves problems for the student. *"I feel the majority of the reason so many are not developing these skills is that parents are protecting and not allowing them to learn to stand on their own two*

*feet. Parents are doing too much for the children and not allowing them to experience making wrong decisions and learning from them."* ~Faculty


Alumni and employers talked about mentoring specifically as a workplace mentor, someone focused on helping students and new employees gain skills to progress in their career. From an employability perspective, a mentor should be someone who can give honest, rigorous, timely feedback about the employee's work and self-management in the workplace.

A mentor's role during an internship can be key to the internship being an effective learning tool. *"Allow the student to be in the professional setting, working with the clients and performing the actual job itself. Allow the student to struggle a little bit, but back the student up and give encouragement to get back into the fray. Assist the student with different scenarios of how to communicate with the client or co-worker. Let the student choose how to handle the situation and then assess afterwards. Internships are invaluable, but the mentor must be available to assess, encourage and back up that student."* ~Alumni


Understanding that the mentor/mentee relationship is not intuitive, university and workplace programs can teach students best practices for how to benefit from and contribute to a mentor relationship. *"I had an amazing mentor yet didn't have the perspective to ask him many of the questions I should have. I felt like I 'should' know the answers or like everyone figures it out on their own."* ~Alumni







*“[Working] will help them to develop skills of prioritizing multiple commitments, communicating with others, and succeeding and failing in small ways daily. If you develop skills like those in lower level jobs before you enter your professional career, it is much easier to keep going when the going gets tough. It’s familiar territory that you know how to deal with.” ~EMPLOYER*



Students need to understand that having a mentor is a privilege, not a right. The mentor relationship is improved by respecting and appreciating the time and effort that has been invested. *“Understand the value of feedback and coaching. If someone cares enough to tell you the truth, thank them for investing in you and give their advice strong consideration.”*  
~Employer

#### **PERSISTENCE THEME 5:**

*Experiences – Start working early, work in a variety of places.*

Working was the predominant experience suggested for cultivating persistence. The recommendation was to encourage students to start working early in life, start working anywhere, continue working, and take advantage of internship opportunities. *“I think students that gain meaningful work experience during their youth are more adaptable to the workforce realities. ... The ability to cope with and make the workplace more enjoyable comes with experiences.”* ~Alumni

The optimum way to learn employability skills, including persistence, is to work. Working during high school and college years is an important part of personal and

professional growth and more than just an opportunity to earning spending money. *“Low-wage, part time jobs through high school and college – working for a variety of personality types and organizational structures – that prepared me for navigating both people and tasks at the bottom of the rung.”* ~Alumni

Low wage work experience, such as service jobs, parks and recreation staff, and general labor, provide opportunities for students to learn to work well with others, accept direction, and experience critique. Developing a thicker skin comes naturally from working for someone, as the employee becomes accustomed to being led and corrected. Gaining these skills in a smaller scale, non-career job will give students a significant advantage, as opposed to learning them at their first post-college career placement. *“[Working] will help them to develop skills of prioritizing multiple commitments, communicating with others, and succeeding and failing in small ways daily. If you develop skills like those in lower level jobs before you enter your professional career, it is much easier to keep going when the going gets tough. It’s familiar territory that you know how to deal with.”* ~Employer

Internships and work that are related to career fields can be beneficial in helping students focus on their career goals, determine if the career is the right path and practice the professional



behaviors specific to their field. *“Internships can be invaluable, especially when paired with a good mentor. That can expose students to the realities of work, provide a trusted/safe person to talk through issues with, and devise appropriate strategies to address the issues. These experiences can also provide some structured experiences to allow growth in these areas.” ~Alumni* Internships provide a unique opportunity to connect academics with work and apply what is being learned. *“My internship was the thing that made me go ‘that’s why I need to know that.’” It helped me learn that you need to stick through the hard parts to get settled.” ~Alumni* These firsthand experiences allow students to make informed decisions based on realistic expectations when choosing a career path, leading to more potential for workplace persistence.

In a classroom setting, developing courses and projects that give students practical experience can be used as a method to build employability skills that will enhance persistence. *“Courses that give students lots of responsibility and independence really help with this. I had a service-learning course that taught theoretical knowledge for half the semester, and essentially made groups of students go out and work on a project in a professional manner somewhere in the community. It was a vitally important experience to be forced to grow up in that way – we were representing our professor, the university, and had to act professionally and deliver a product to get an A in the class.” ~ Student*

Long-term participation in extracurricular events or clubs can be another source for fostering persistence. Joining a club as a freshman or sophomore and continuing for multiple years is a practice in persistence as well as other skills such as working with others. *“[I] think there are some different ways persistence can be developed in young people. For high school students, it can be developed by participating in sports, clubs, contest teams, fine arts, or other extra-curricular activities. While in college, club involvement, research projects, or having a job while in school could also help develop those skills. The ability to balance scheduling while working through an activity is how I believe students can gain persistence.” ~Alumni*

Stretch learning, experiences outside of one’s comfort zone, are lessons in how to manage feeling uncomfortable while not knowing all of the answers. Not withdrawing when circumstances become challenging or uncomfortable is a principal factor in fostering persistence. To promote stretch experiences an alumni respondent provided the following examples, *“I’m talking more so about encouraging students to experience life outside of the traditional ‘[leadership] rubric of success’ that we reward and... [instead focus more on] learning a new language, taking a semester abroad, minoring in something outside of my degree, enrolling in business courses, or something to gain a new skill set that would have challenged me.” ~Alumni*

*“My internship was the thing that made me go ‘that’s why I need to know that.’” It helped me learn that you need to stick through the hard parts to get settled.” ~ALUMNI*



## Summary of Key Takeaways for Navigating Persistence

1

### MANAGING EXPECTATIONS.

Students and new employees should:

- Be provided honest information about job prospects, entry experience & career trajectory.
- Be exposed to career pathways, along with the twists & challenges they may face.
- Recognize that rewards are more than salary & promotion.

2

### FAILURE AS GROWTH.

Students and new employees should:

- Be provided opportunities to fail, work with minimal directions, repeat work assignments, and deal with negative critique.
- Learn how setting goals and handling setbacks helps with persistence.
- Develop a growth mindset – skills can be developed with dedication and hard work.

3

### PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIORS & SOCIAL SKILLS.

Students and new employees should:

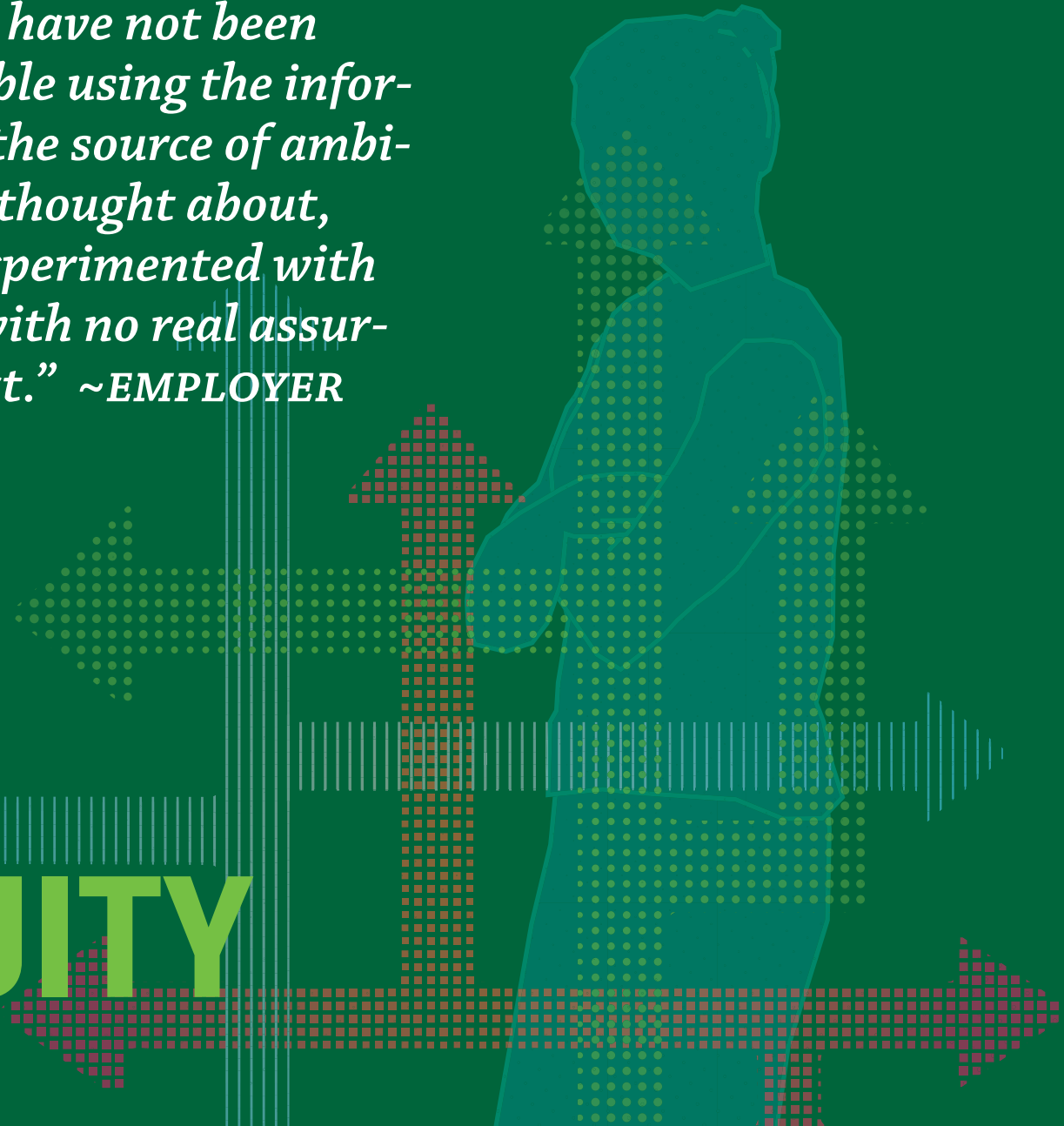
- Be expected and encouraged to work - anywhere!
- Seek mentoring & networking with alumni, employers, and peers (beyond family & faculty).
- Acquire adulting skills– “the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks.”

*Google Dictionary.*

# PERSISTENCE

*“This may be the toughest of the skills you identify in this survey. It is essential for grads to understand that in the real world, the problems have not been pre-designed to be solvable using the information at hand. This is the source of ambiguity. Answers must be thought about, researched, creatively experimented with and ultimately applied with no real assurance that they are correct.” ~EMPLOYER*

**AMBIGUITY**



## Navigating Ambiguity in the Workplace

For recent graduates who have finished an education with the structure of a syllabus for every class and a grading rubric for evaluations, the realm of ambiguity can be a new and intimidating place. An employee's attitude towards ambiguity can lead them either on a path towards opportunity, innovation, and growth or a path towards fear and rigidity. So much of success lies in an attitude. For ambiguity, it is finding comfort and flexibility in the fact that life is ambiguous. Finding comfort with ambiguity can lead to seeing the situation as a time to use creative and critical thinking skills to explore new ideas, new processes or new ways of doing things.

The current reality is that employees deal with ambiguity on a daily basis. In order to identify strategies that universities can utilize to teach students how to deal with ambiguity in job tasks and workplace expectations, the researchers asked stakeholders the following question: "The new work environment can seem ambiguous to a new employee. Sometimes decisions need to be made with partial or incomplete information. At other times, a plan of action needs to be adjusted, or work redone, as new information arrives or company priorities change. How can the ability to deal with ambiguity be developed in formal or informal settings before beginning a professional career?"

When the responses were coded, five codebook themes emerged from the data.

### AMBIGUITY THEME 1:

#### *Seeking information – Do something, then ask.*

Listening and actually processing the words spoken sometimes seem to be two completely different concepts. Often people hear the words being spoken while their minds are racing to come up with the best response, or maybe even thinking about something else entirely. This was specifically cited as a frustration amongst stakeholders surveyed, indicating that new graduates may struggle with accurately listening to what is being said. *"Learn to ask good questions helps, but more importantly the ability to listen is critical. Many young people are trying to formulate the response while the other person is talking instead of truly listening."* ~Employer

Universities can strengthen curriculum by emphasizing the development of strong listening skills, a competency that is applicable in many courses. *"Effective listening and evaluating what's heard will lead to good questions. The answers to those questions will alleviate ambiguity. Help students learn how to listen to all kind of people, from peers to mentors to teachers to administrators. These are the same age ranges and levels of professional achievement that they'll meet in the workplace."*

~Employer



***“Learning to ask good questions helps, but more importantly the ability to listen is critical. Many young people are trying to formulate the response while the other person is talking instead of truly listening.”***

**~EMPLOYER**

Asking questions is a common technique used for information gathering. *“Teaching students how to ask good questions to clarify ambiguous situations would be helpful. It’s also important to help them understand that they have the ability to take initiative to do some background work/research when confronted with an ambiguous situation so that they can become active participants in solving problems of ambiguous natures rather than passive bystanders.”* ~Faculty Taking the initiative to gather additional information displays a much higher skill level than simply asking questions. This level of effort may be much appreciated by teammates and employers.

Employer respondents provided insight into the timing of questions and the type of questions they would appreciate new employees be prepared to ask. *“The key here is learning how to ask the ‘right questions.’ Too often new employees are embarrassed to ask questions or repeat an assignment to make sure they understand what’s being asked. Learning how to do that appropriately helps to make sure the assigner and the assignee are on the same page. I also think it’s important to teach young professionals to ask questions along the way to make sure they are on the right track with a decision, project, or plan. It’s going to be less work in the long run if time is spent planning at the beginning and feedback is asked for and given throughout than to hand over a completed project just to find out it’s not what was needed.”* ~Employer

When seeking clarity in an ambiguous situation, it is essential to identify the assumptions that have been made and accepted as fact. There are many things that are assessed as facts, but in

actuality are assumptions. *“Students should be taught to ask questions, to follow up, and to be self-starters. Having a good research background would help with that. Teach them that there are no bad questions, but there are bad assumptions. Encourage them to go back to their supervisor with well-researched follow up questions to clarify tasks and plans, especially if they feel like things are incomplete or changing.”* ~Employer

An example of a hidden assumption in the workplace is when something is done a certain way because it has been done that way for the last several years. *“People need to understand that information is coming so quickly and changing radically that they can’t rely on what has always been standard operating procedure. People need to understand that change is nothing personal.”* ~Employer Recent graduates have a unique, fresh perspective that could be used as an advantage when looking at age old processes. Preparing graduates to seek information regarding existing processes and ways to respectfully convey their ideas can increase their ability to manage ambiguity.

In addition to asking the right questions, there is the issue that navigating ambiguity is an iterative process; one seeks information repeatedly along the way. The search for the answer to one question often leads to the next as the project or assignment travels towards clarity. *“Teach students to think outside the box. Textbooks are great guidance tools but not necessarily the only answer. Students need to grasp an understanding of when they can make decisions and when they need to involve others. At some point, a decision has to be made and often it is fairly simple. Complications occur when there are mitigating circumstances that are not considered. Students need the ability to ask the correct questions that can determine if they can make the decision or if someone else needs to be involved.”* ~ Alumni Projects where students can apply an iterative process provide practice in understanding what the next question should be.

Finally, critical thinking should be applied during the quest for information; ask questions of oneself before asking them of others, learn to ask good questions, and to ask them at strategic points in the process. *“As a young employee it took me a while to get in the habit of asking in plain, brief terms, basic questions about assignments so I don’t have to keep following up (and annoying a superior). Follow up questions aren’t all bad, if framed well and used sparingly. It’s also better than staying stuck and waiting until it’s too late. As for new information, that goes hand in hand with doing the task assigned... Stay in your lane is something that I have had to say.”*

~Alumni This visualization of ambiguity being caused by the employee veering outside the lane of the given assignment and drifting into unfamiliar territory outside of the employee’s role or area of expertise may be a beneficial analogy for students.

## AMBIGUITY THEME 2:

*Decision-making development- Accept, frame, decide, explain; repeat.*

In the real-world work environment, it is common to work with incomplete information. Often, all of the pieces of the puzzle are not provided and employees must gather enough pieces of information to be able to apply decision-making strategies. *“... Striving for 100% accuracy isn’t logical and could be costly. Interpret 80% of the data that will derive the most value and then call out the assumptions to ensure whomever is being presented to understand the underlying assumptions and reason for a certain decision.”*

~Alumni

Students and new graduates who may be overwhelmed by all of the decisions that they must now make, may be less overwhelmed if they understand that all decision-making can be broken down into a relatively simple, repetitive process. *“Ronald Reagan used to repeat a quote from the film industry, ‘they don’t want [the movie] perfect, they want it Thursday.’ His point was that*

*if we wait until all the data is in or all the ‘angles’ are considered, often the situation has changed so much that the analysis must be done over. Fighter pilots talk about the ‘OODA (Orient, Observe, Decide, Act) Loop.’ Successful pilots (those that survive) are those that have a good understanding of their abilities and that of their equipment. Then they can quickly run an OODA Loop over and over again to win a dogfight. Another term is ‘analysis paralysis.’ Too many individuals get so concerned about doing something perfect, they never get to a conclusion and start getting the work done.”*

~Alumni Several respondents shared their ideas about components of decision making processes, such as the quote above. When their ideas are brought together, the components can be articulated as accepting, framing, deciding and explaining.

- Accept: Identify the information needed to make a decision, even if it is incomplete.
- Frame: Identify the boundaries of the problem.
- Decide: Using all of the information and factors available, make a decision.
- Explain: Be prepared to defend the answer and process.

This process can be repeated as many times as necessary while working through an activity or project. A solid decision-making process is an effective employability skill for working through situations that are perceived as ambiguous.

A potential gap that new employees may have in their decision-making technique lies in looking for the right way to complete every task. In reality, it is not about the right way but instead about doing a solid process to identify the problems and decision-making that is needed to develop an answer. *“I think this often revolves around the false idea that there is one ‘right way.’ If we spend time regularly using the process of ‘make a decision, analyze the results, change as needed,’ we would be far ahead in this process [of managing ambiguity].”* ~Employer





Being timid during decision-making was also presented as a concern by respondents. *“Don’t rely on others to make decisions for you and understand the easiest way is not always the best course of action.” ~Student* Not making a decision is also a decision. *“If a person understands that ambiguity is the norm, not the exception, then it will seem less threatening. Students also need to learn and appreciate that a decision not made (procrastination) is a decision made. Problem solving skills – learning to define a problem, identify the genesis of a problem, define realistic objectives, identify and evaluate alternatives, etc – will help allay fears in the face of incomplete information.” ~Faculty*

Fear of making a mistake can be crippling for new employees until they have confidence in their decision-making skills. *“It goes back to thinking instead of just doing. Think your way out of situations. Don’t be paralyzed by fear or lack of knowledge. Any decision is better than no decision; if you make a mistake you learn, if you make a good decision it gives you confidence to move to the next level.” ~Employer*

### **AMBIGUITY THEME 3:** *Independent thinking – Opportunity for creative and critical thinking.*

In an ambiguous space, there is opportunity for innovation and thinking outside of straight-line perimeters. *“Sometimes you just have to step outside the situation and look for solutions to problems that are not obvious or usual in procedure.” ~Employer*

Creative thinking was cited often as a strategy for managing ambiguity, but it is worth noting that creative thinking was not listed as a popular strategy for the other research topics of persistence, change, or conflict. The creative thought process involves thinking of things in a new or different way, utilizing a fresh perspective. *“To deal with ambiguity, students must enhance*

*“I think this often revolves around the false idea that there is one ‘right way.’ If we spend time regularly using the process of ‘make a decision, analyze the results, change as needed,’ we would be far ahead in this process [of managing ambiguity].” ~EMPLOYER*

*their problem-solving skills. In my experience, I gained problem-solving skills from assignments that involved creative thinking. When you are accustomed to working on projects that allow you the freedom to be creative, you are not nervous about the ambiguity of a workplace assignment.” ~Student*

Independent thinking also opens the mind to the concept that sometimes the answer is written in sand, not in cement. *“Ambiguity can open freedom to creative interpretations and responses, or be debilitating. Students need to be guided on how to achieve an actionable level of detail while retaining creative space.” ~Employer*

Curiosity fosters creative and innovative thinking. *“Developing curiosity, not punishing people for mistakes, and empathy skills can help people better understand the situation and consequences.” ~Alumni* This freedom to explore and think independently may not have been fully developed prior to attending university. The scholarship and experiences available at universities can be used as a catalyst for inspiring a spirit of curiosity.

Incorporating critical and independent thinking skill development in curricular and extra-curricular experiences is an approach recommended by respondents for preparing new graduates for working through ambiguity in the workplace. *“Practicing critical thinking by limiting one’s reliance on others to establish answers and understanding. In today’s age, it is often one’s*

*first response to look for an answer on the internet; however rather than looking for the answer – looking for the information that will allow you to figure out the answer is more valuable. This allows for future application and flexibility so that in ambiguous situations decisions can still be made with proper thought and a clear mind.”*  
~Student

#### **AMBIGUITY THEME 4:** *Transitions – Stay calm and carry on.*

Transitioning from college to the workforce is a significant event, one that should not be underestimated. This will not be a seamless process for most new employees and there will be bumps in the road. Reoccurring themes in the data set were “*stay calm and carry on*,” “*life is uncertain*,” and “*go with the flow*.”

*“Being able to ‘go with the flow’ is a must in the real world.”* ~Student

What strategies can educators share to help new employees work through transition periods? “*Just like life, plans change. Learn to be organized and stay professional and calm through stressful situations.*” ~Alumni Organizational strategies can extend beyond keeping a workspace manageable. The manual or digital organization of information so that it can be retrieved quickly is a valuable skill that can be taught and practiced. Helping students to identify potential reactions to stress and strategies to maintain professionalism while under stress is a topic that educators can address in preparing students for entrance into the workforce.

Part of working through ambiguity is being comfortable with not knowing for certain what is coming next, and confidence in knowing that whatever comes along is manageable. “*It took me a while to learn that pretty much everyone is about as lost as I am and is mostly figuring things out as they go along, regardless of how educated they are or how elevated their position is. Once you accept*

*that no one in charge magically has the answers, it gets a lot easier to just get the job done.”* ~Alumni Unlike in school, there are rarely clear roadmaps to guide each step in the workplace. “*There are no rubrics at work. We all need to learn to make decisions and move forward with incomplete or erroneous information. We all need to be resourceful and take responsibility for our own learning.*” ~Faculty

Another major transition element for students, even at the college level, is that they are used to looking to a parent or adult for answers. Educators have the opportunity to empower young adults by teaching them the process of finding the solution themselves, thus helping them build confidence in taking the responsibility of decision-making into their own hands. “*Force young people to deal with situations where ambiguity is prevalent. I know my own young adult children struggle with decision making when they feel like they don’t know all of the details. Their response is usually to come to their parents, or another authority figure, for the solutions, which too often we readily offer. This makes them less accountable and more dependent. Young people need safe environments to practice successful failure.*” ~Employer

#### **AMBIGUITY THEME 5:** *Knowledge evolution - 1 + 1 (does not always) = 2.*

*“Most students do not understand that 1 plus 1 does not always equal 2! Policy changes and the emerging issues related to the environment are two examples.”* ~Faculty

Flexible thinking is valuable in the modern workplace; organizations are evolving, fields are evolving, and society is evolving. There is strength in the cultivation of graduates who are confident in their ability to learn new skills and adapt to situations as they arise and evolve. An employer spoke to the need for “*constant understanding that we work to the reality that occurs, do not stick with old norms just because they are comfortable. There are*





*many stories of these changes. Especially today. Who knew that all nightlights would soon be LED's and people could hold their computers in their hands?" ~Employer*

Innovation and evolution are sometimes messy processes and graduates need to be prepared to embrace the mess. *"By showing students that the information they are learning about was generated through these very kinds of processes. There is an overwhelming tendency to present knowledge as the products of genius and linear paths of discovery. In reality, most knowledge and understanding is the product of repeated failures, accidental discoveries, the willingness to collaborate and incremental advances. Portray the history of knowledge acquisition more realistically, and you can create a cultural narrative of flexibility and comfort with uncertainty."* ~Faculty

Problem solving is a complex skill and requires practice for skill development. During the academic process, students are often taught how various tools and techniques can be used for problem solving. An employer respondent expressed that these lessons could be expanded to include when to apply each tool to successfully navigate ambiguity. *"I find that when I get a new college graduate I have to retrain them in structured problem solving. Often the students have learned or have been exposed to the tools in their curriculum but the process failed to educate the student in how the tools help to navigate ambiguity."* ~Employer

A concept that may not be widely discussed in college is that not all problems are solvable, and students need an understanding of when to stop chasing answers. *"This may be the toughest of the skills you identify in this survey. It is essential for grads to understand that in the real world, the problems have not been pre-designed to be solvable using the information at hand. This is the source of ambiguity. Answers must be thought about, researched, creatively experimented with and ultimately applied with no real assurance that they are correct."* ~Employer

Knowledge grows and evolves through working with diverse teams of people and looking at problems through the perspective of different disciplines. Learning to appreciate and seek out cross disciplinary and diverse contributors to solving a problem or making a decision can increase the chances of success. *"[It is] important that students are exposed to courses in different departments at the university so they can appreciate and value the knowledge of professionals from other groups (example accountants, IT department, Legal, Human Resources). Often navigating through change in a larger [organization] requires assistance from people with expertise in other areas."* ~Employer

Furthermore, a diverse team can bring a broad set of knowledge and skills to bear on a problem. *"None of us have all the answers but by working together we pool our knowledge and our experiences to develop solutions to problems. If necessary, we evaluate and change as the information changes. Formal education that prioritizes building the skills necessary to communicate, work in teams and be adaptable can be more important than rote knowledge."* ~Employer  
Universities can be the builder or the breaker of silos. The benefit of cross collaboration in college extends to the workplace. New employees who already see the benefits of working with cross disciplinary teams will be better prepared to work in diverse teams and effectively solve problems.

*"It took me a while to learn that pretty much everyone is about as lost as I am and is mostly figuring things out as they go along, regardless of how educated they are or how elevated their position is. Once you accept that no one in charge magically has the answers, it gets a lot easier to just get the job done."* ~ALUMNI

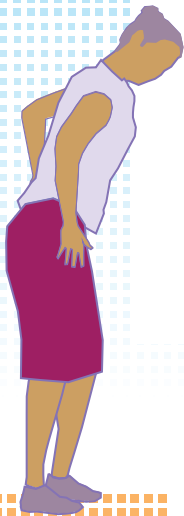
## Summary of Key Takeaways for Navigating Ambiguity

1

### AMBIGUITY IS A NORMAL PART OF LIFE AND WORK.

Students and new employees should:

- Learn that most workplaces will not provide explicit directions, like a syllabus, or a rubric outlining expectations.
- Understand that listening is a skill and can be improved with practiced.
- Discover that sometimes ambiguity is a product of being outside of the employee's lane of work or sphere of influence.



2

### TRANSFORMATION CHANGES WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW AND HOW WE KNOW IT.

Students and new employees should:

- Comprehend the importance of process and the iterative nature of process work.
- Recognize that working with others brings new perspectives.
- Appreciate that how a problem is framed determines what is valued.

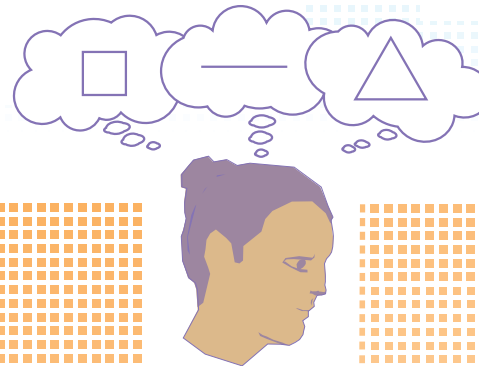
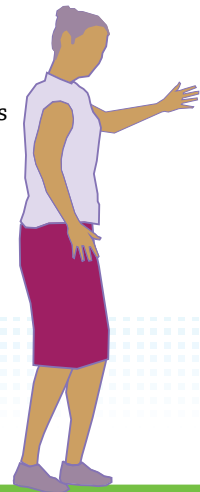


3

### AMBIGUITY CREATES OPPORTUNITY.

Students and new employees should:

- Realize it is all about a positive attitude.
- Appreciate that ambiguity creates opportunities for creative and critical thinking.



# AMBIGUITY



*“This is often asked during interviews at my company. We are looking for candidates to provide an example where they were faced with a sudden change and how they were able to adapt and/or react. What we are REALLY looking for, however, are examples where candidates are able to anticipate change and use it as an opportunity for growth.”*

*~EMPLOYER*

# CHANGE

A stylized illustration of a person in a dark suit and tie, running through rain. The person is depicted in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose, with their arms outstretched. The background is a solid dark blue, and the rain is represented by numerous white vertical lines of varying lengths. The person's face is obscured by a dark, solid shape, and their hair is also represented by a dark shape. The overall aesthetic is modern and minimalist.

## Navigating Change in the Workplace

Without change there is not innovation, invention, or growth. While these concepts are universally viewed as positive, this does not negate that the actual process of change can be stressful or painful. The ability to be proactive and adapt in a changing environment are skills that can be learned.

To capture stakeholder's responses regarding the ability of recent graduates to deal with the pace and content of change in the workplace, the survey asked the following question: "In today's work environment, change is a constant and it is occurring at an ever increasing speed. The types of changes cross all aspects of the work environment: technology; specialty knowledge and skills; work flow and organizational systems; and expectations of clients, employers and peers. How can the ability to deal with change be developed in formal or informal settings before beginning a professional career?"

From the coded survey responses five themes emerged.

### CHANGE THEME 1:

#### *Workplace orientation – Change IS the norm.*


For an active organization or growing business, change IS the norm. When the alternative to change is stagnancy, change is necessary and should be viewed in a positive light.

One alumni respondent expressed the importance of change in the workplace by saying *"understanding that change is not only expected but required for a business to continue to evolve is critical."*


While the basic concept that change is good is easy to accept logically, it is often more challenging when the changes are being experienced firsthand. Sudden or frequent changes that are unable to be fully embraced before implementation can compound frustrations. Employers expect new graduates to be fluid, able to maneuver through changes, regardless of size and impact, while maintaining a professional and positive outlook. Presenting change as common and not something to be feared or avoided can help students navigate change in the workplace. *"Change is constant... As someone in business, you need someone that takes the change and makes it a positive for the business and themselves."* ~Alumni

A fundamental employability skill is the ability to adapt to change professionally, whether the individual employee is onboard with the direction or not. *"We could do a better job introducing change and/or challenging situations [in the university]... It doesn't matter whether the situation is fair or not, because life is not fair. They must adapt and move on."* ~Faculty New employees must understand that they are often not privy to all of the information that an employer used when implementing a change. Sometimes lack of information is due to the employer





***“Prepare to be a lifelong learner. The more experience I’ve gained the more I realized how much I didn’t know. Be flexible and always open to learning something new. The only constant is change.” ~ALUMNI***



being unable to share all of the details, or a shortage of time before implementation is required. Particularly if a change needs to be implemented quickly, new employees must be able to accept that the situation may not feel fair, but they must be able to adapt and move forward in an effective manner. *“This is often asked during interviews at my company. We are looking for candidates to provide an example where they were faced with a sudden change and how they were able to adapt and/or react. What we are REALLY looking for, however, are examples where candidates are able to anticipate change and use it as an opportunity for growth.” ~Employer* Ultimately, change is coming. It is up to each individual to determine if they are providing an active contribution, or are merely along for the ride.

## **CHANGE THEME 2:**

### ***Coping mechanisms – Self-awareness.***

*“Promoting excellent communication training and self-reflection/awareness exercises are an excellent way to help people accept change. Part of the difficulty is accepting that we have the most control over our reaction to a situation, not the situation itself.” ~Alumni* While a particular change may be out of an individual’s locus of control, recently graduated employees must understand that they do possess the ability to control their reactions. The earlier in the education process students learn how they respond to stress, the sooner they can equip themselves with coping mechanisms and strategies to effectively respond when changes occur. *“In both school and home life, students need to learn to be laid back and adaptable about change instead of stressing about it. The more they*

*try to fight change, the harder it will be to deal with it. Embracing it and using it to their advantage and learning from it will help them thrive.” ~Alumni* A range of tools are available to help people identify how they respond to change. *“Students need to identify if they are an innovator, early starter, slow starter, or resistant to change. I... was able to identify that I am resistant to change. Having that confirmed help me to overcome the urges to resist.” ~Alumni*

Resistance, feeling overwhelmed, disappointment, and even excitement, are all reactions that can lessen an employee’s effectiveness. *As an employee “the hardest lesson I had to learn was ‘Be proactive. Not reactive.’” ~Employer* This employer’s reference to being proactive in response to change can be broken down into applicable strategies that can be shared with students such as having *“a strong growth mindset, practice linking challenge with opportunity, and separating identity (and ego) from situations and jobs.” ~Employer*

Maintaining perspective increases the ability to stay calm and continue to accomplish work. *“Keeping perspective for what is truly life altering vs just stressful is something all students should learn.” ~Alumni* Taking a moment to think openly about a particular change creates space for recalibration, time to slow down and process implementation steps and additional impacts.

Understanding that there are multiple ways to arrive at an outcome helps new employees see change from multiple perspectives and successfully work as a team. *“6+3=9...5+4=9. There are multiple ways to get a result. Emphasize the importance of thinking through issues and finding a way that works for the way they think.” ~Employer* Often when an employer requests a change, the employee has the flexibility to determine how the actual process is implemented. With multiple ways to arrive at the same outcome, having the freedom to use a method that aligns with the way their team thinks, can improve employee investment in the



change. The concept of multiple avenues to the same outcome can be reassuring for the new employee; understanding that the process currently being used may not be wrong, there is merely new information and another route to the solution. *“You have to learn that it’s ok to drop everything and switch gears. Adapt to the situation, don’t expect the situation to adapt to your expectations.” ~Alumni*

### CHANGE THEME 3:

#### *Knowledge evolution – Strength lies in the foundation.*

*“While change is a constant throughout one’s career. What remains consistent is the tools needed to thrive with change. Professional (and personal) skills like... personal responsibility, time management, ... communication... technical reading and comprehension, and problem solving are general skills that have not changed, but are critical to dealing with new career expectations” ~Employer*

When change occurs within the workplace, it is often not actually earth shattering, though it may feel that way at the time. Strong foundational knowledge in the field allows both minor and major changes to be implemented without a complete loss of security. *“Know the fundamentals of your field, change occurs to the advancements, not the fundamentals.” ~Student* Having an anchor of strong industry knowledge, technical skills, and problem-solving abilities allows individuals, teams, and organizations to not only survive, but thrive through change.

*“I think a focus on learning how to analyze information and connect the dots between disparate pieces of information will transcend change.” ~Employer* To transcend change within the workplace, employees will need to apply the evolution of knowledge they acquired in school, in life, and in the workplace. The general ability to think openly and continuously improves the ability to connect the dots when things are changing. *“Prepare to be a lifelong learner. The more experience I’ve gained the more I realized how much I didn’t know. Be flexible and always open to learning something new. The only constant is change.” ~Alumni*

### CHANGE THEME 4:

#### *Stretch experiences – Venture out of the comfort zone.*

The ability to stretch beyond one’s comfort zone increases the ability to smoothly navigate changes at work. Beneficial stretch experiences extend beyond the experiences found in a work or school setting; try new things, visit new places and associate with different people. For some students, college will be the first time that they have had the opportunity to have new experiences without the comfort of their families or core friends from high school. While this may be an exciting prospect for some students, it may be intimidating or overwhelming for others. Students may not have the confidence to begin this exploration on their own. The activities and events that colleges offer present students with a safe place to begin the journey of building confidence and exploring outside of their comfort zones.

*“Those that do not learn to deal with change have a lack of confidence. Change normally brings about vulnerability (new experiences that we have not been exposed to before). Those that are not confident in themselves will not accept the change. Those that are confident will know that while they may be exposed to new circumstances, there is no doubt in their ability to manage through it.” ~Alumni*

Being resistant to change can be rooted in the feelings of discomfort that accompany change. Extending the boundaries of one’s comfort zone builds skills needed to work through the feelings of resistance and discomfort. Taking a public speaking class, joining a team or club with a different group of people, traveling to a new city or country all may feel uncomfortable, but provide valuable opportunities for growth. *“Encouraging students to get outside of their comfort zone will force them to see change and be more open to it. One of the most important aspects of change is to understand the discomfort associated with the change and moving past that.” ~Alumni*



Respondents talked about the benefits of taking a breadth of courses across a variety of disciplines. *“[It is] important that students are exposed to courses in different departments so they can appreciate and value the knowledge of professionals from other groups. Often navigating through change requires assistance from people with expertise in other areas.” ~Employer* Having a wide range of knowledge and experiences will help employees contribute broadly and relate to team members from other disciplines, ultimately improving the team’s impact.

In particular, traveling was cited as a beneficial stretch experience for learning to navigate change. When traveling, invariably something does not work out as planned and the only option is to rise above the discomfort. Getting lost in a beautiful city, trying local cuisine, and figuring out foreign currency are all examples of opportunities for developing skills and building confidence useful in navigating change. *“Ideally, I would say give every student the opportunity to spend some time overseas. Living in a culture other than your own requires a great deal of adjustment and change on your own part. I think international travel teaches the ability to adjust to new or changing situations like nothing else.” ~Student* Even a major change in processes at work can seem less daunting after having successfully navigated a poorly marked hiking trail or the Paris underground transit system.

***“Encouraging students to get outside of their comfort zone will force them to see change and be more open to it. One of the most important aspects of change is to understand the discomfort associated with the change and moving past that.”***

**~ALUMNI**

## **CHANGE THEME 5:**

### ***Independent thinking – Cultivate curiosity.***

Curiosity is a unique component of intellectual thinking. The motivation to seek learning, or curiosity, is a coachable trait and one that can be expanded by university experiences. *“Figure out how to measure thinking, creativity, problem solving, application of knowledge, and collaboration and grade those. That person will be able to deal with change.” ~Alumni* Educators can provide opportunities for learning to extend beyond the syllabus and teach students how to explore a diversity of topics, problem solving methods, and to seek out and utilize a variety of resources. *“Cross-disciplinary coursework could force students to think outside of the usual framework, while encouraging them to apply what they do know in a new context.” ~Student*

The ability to think independently allows an employee to take on new challenges *“by building process oriented skill sets. Most of the changes come down to creating a process with a team that will allow an organization to transition from the current state to something different... Those with process skill sets and the communication skills will either be the architect of one of these processes or to just be able to digest one that they will have to participate in.” ~Employer*

With the ability to work effectively through change, there is value in being a generalist. That is not necessarily someone who does not specialize in anything at all, but someone who has completed a broad base of coursework and a variety of experiences that they can use within their chosen field. They can use these skills to transfer knowledge across situations. *“Our education system currently focuses too much on preparing people for particular careers. However, the constant changes in technology and economic factors (such as offshoring) mean that many jobs that will be available ten years from now do not yet exist. This is why it is so important that students learn to transfer knowledge from one situation to another.” ~Employer*



## Summary of Key Takeaways for Navigating Change

1

### STUDENTS AND NEW EMPLOYEES SHOULD LEARN THAT CHANGE IS GOING TO HAPPEN (WITH OR WITHOUT THEM).

They should:

- Be proactive and adapt to the change.
- Learn about themselves and how they react to change.
- Learn to see the change from multiple perspectives.



2

### FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE CREATES A BASE FROM WHICH TO NAVIGATE CHANGE.

Students and new employees should:

- Know the basics, understand processes, and look for knowledge connections across situations.
- Be an adaptable learner and cross the disciplinary silos.



3

### ENGAGE CHANGE AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND AND GROW.

Students and new employees should:

- Gain courage and confidence through the discomfort of stretch experiences.
- Understand that solutions are created with diverse teams.



*“Keeping perspective for what is truly life altering vs just stressful is something all students should learn.” ~ALUMNI*

# CHANGE



*“Teamwork is not the absence of conflict, it is the joint acceptance of a goal. Resolution of conflict starts with playground drama and continues through group efforts, clubs, and vocations.” ~EMPLOYER*

An illustration of two stylized human figures, a woman on the left and a man on the right, shaking hands. The woman is wearing a dark dress and has her hair in a bun. The man is wearing a dark suit and tie. They are standing in front of a background that features a green area with a white dotted pattern on the left and a blue area with white vertical stripes on the right. The word "CONFLICT" is written in large, bold, white capital letters at the bottom left.

**CONFLICT**

## Navigating Conflict in the Workplace

Conflict is guaranteed to arise in the workplace in some form, making many new graduates, as well as seasoned employees, feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped to handle the situation. Identifying the type of conflict, assessing the degree of conflict, and managing personal emotions/reactions are all elements of how a conflict situation is perceived. Conflict will always exist, there will always be different opinions and ideas, and these varying viewpoints are often a doorway to growth.

To capture responses regarding managing conflict in the workplace, the survey asked participants to answer the following question: “No matter what career a student chooses, the fact is that he/she will face conflicts in the workplace. These conflicts can be difficult to navigate, especially when the work environment is different from their home, academic, or past work experiences. How can the ability to deal constructively with conflict be developed in formal or informal settings before beginning a professional career?”

In consideration of preparing new graduates for managing conflict in the workplace five primary themes emerged.


### CONFLICT THEME 1:

#### *Relationships - Build diverse relationships.*


Respondents identified building diverse relationships as one key to establishing a healthy relationship with conflict. *“To be effective, new graduates must learn to take the necessary time to reflect before reacting when potential conflict arises. Do not get angry. Do not take things very personal. Reach out to your mentors to discuss how to best navigate and above all- stay positive and learn to accept our diversity in the workplace and know that everyone operates a little differently.” ~Alumni*

Exposure to, and most importantly, learning respect for diversity teaches students how to embrace these different viewpoints without interpreting them as a provocation. Encouraging students to participate in and seek out activities that involve being exposed to people who are different than themselves provides the student with immeasurable opportunities for growth. Beneficial experiences and relationships cover more than just the larger diversity topics such as race or religion, they can be found in another individual’s abilities, skills, and experiences that are different from one’s own.





***“Attack problems, not people. Accept that others are different from you, and not just externally or religiously. Introverts, people on the autism spectrum, those with disabilities, etc. all process information differently from the stereotyped ‘norm’ but can be valuable members of a team or organization if given the chance.” ~ALUMNI***



When hiring someone who has completed their college education, employers expect their new employee to have achieved a certain level of emotional intelligence prior to starting their career. Emotional intelligence is developed with maturity and experience. Allowing opportunities for students to navigate social situations that may be new for them will create the space for students to begin to understand relationships and improve their conflict management skills.

If conflict resolution had a mantra, it may very well be *“attack problems, not people.”* This concept was provided in a response from an alumni participant. *“Attack problems, not people. Accept that others are different from you, and not just externally or religiously. Introverts, people on the autism spectrum, those with disabilities, etc. all process information differently from the stereotyped ‘norm’ but can be valuable members of a team or organization if given the chance.” ~Alumni*

Having a mentor creates a safe space for learning to receive constructive criticism without seeing it as a source of conflict. *“The best way to deal with conflict is by solid mentoring and professional support systems. Teaching how to mentor and teaching how to effectively be mentored are important life skills.” ~Alumni* New

employees can use critique from a mentor to learn to slow down, reflect, and dialogue, before reacting to a situation. Even for experienced employees, criticism and critique are avenues for growth. The ability to not only accept, but also to value, constructive criticism shows a level of maturity that employers appreciate.

#### **CONFLICT THEME 2:**

***Workplace orientation – New employees should know their role in the workplace.***

Not fully understanding their role in the workplace was cited as a potential catalyst of conflict for new employees. Particularly at an introductory level, employers often simply want a team member who will do their job and invest in learning to do it well. These types of workplace boundaries are often unspoken or unclear to a new person or outsider. Navigation of these invisible boundaries requires knowing how to ask questions that clarify the role and the employer’s needs and expectations.

When working as a member of a team, it is helpful for new employees to see the big picture as a way of framing how



***“There are many angles to keep in mind in conflict resolution: emotions, legal parameters, underlying tensions, etc. Learn how to recognize these aspects and resolve conflicts (even specific language to use).” ~FACULTY***



their individual contribution is a part of achieving the end goal. *“By focusing on the end goal and learning not to take things personally one learns to face and deal with conflict in a professional manner.” ~Alumni* In addition to not taking perceived conflict personally, understanding that individuals can only control their own actions, not the actions of their coworkers, can alleviate some of the anxiety associated with conflict. *“Don’t take on stress and problem ownership that is not yours. Maybe it belongs to your supervisor.” ~Employer* Stepping back from the situation, exploring multiple perspectives and not taking things personally are all ways to identifying appropriate workplace roles and boundaries.

Recent graduates may not automatically understand that the employer’s priorities rank higher than their own priorities as an individual employee. *“Conflicts in the workforce are the fundamental basis of any job. Conflicts are problems and must be viewed as opportunities to problem solve. Students must learn to actively listen to others’ view of a problem, not take it personally; let the other side express their concerns and needs, while mentally finding solutions that benefit everyone. The ultimate resolution is what is best for the organization and not necessarily best for you.” ~Employer* As a member of a team, the focus

must be about the work, the business, the organization. New employees need to understand that simply not liking an assignment or having to do a task because “your boss told you to” does not constitute a conflict.

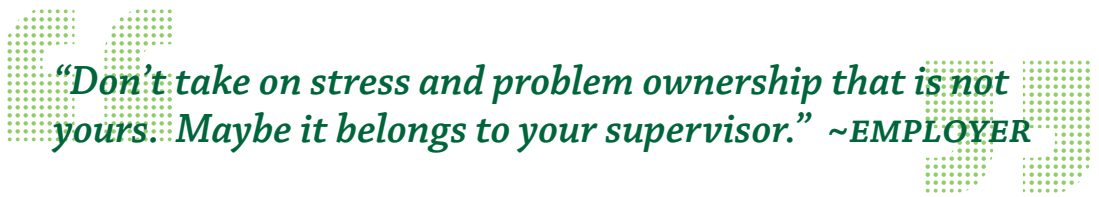
One alumni respondent cautioned new graduates to check their assumptions when navigating conflict. *“Good bosses want the job done right and that is all, so expect neutral behavior and very little praise when starting out as well. Avoid workplace politics, avoid awkward social outings (bars, clubs), and maintain ‘work only’ relationships at all times for continued success and no problems. Do not be the one to create conflict in the first place.” ~Alumni* Further, maintaining focus on the work is less complicated when the personal aspects are kept at a distance.

### **CONFLICT THEME 3:**

***Conflict — Understand the situation and know likely individual reactions to it.***

Conflict is often a taboo subject, something not openly talked about at home or in the workplace. This amplifies the importance of talking about it when preparing students for their future careers. Start the conversation; talk about solutions; and





***“Don’t take on stress and problem ownership that is not yours. Maybe it belongs to your supervisor.” ~EMPLOYER***

share tools that have proven to be effective. *“We’re all human and assuming conflict is inevitable takes some of the scare factor out of it when conflict comes up.” ~Student*

Survey respondents addressed the external situation of the conflict itself, and the internal component of an individual’s response to conflict. Education regarding managing the external component of conflict involves teaching students the benefits that can be gained by taking a step back to interpret the situation. Being able to step outside of the emotional aspects of conflict is made easier when the new employee understands that conflict is inevitable, minor conflicts can be healthy, and they will encounter opinions that differ from their own. Being able to recognize and approach different types and levels of conflict are valuable skills. It is important to recognize the types of conflict that should not have to be handled alone, such as sexual harassment or a hostile work environment. External sources of conflict mentioned in survey responses include differing personalities, how social standards and language have changed over the years, and adjusting to the hierarchy at work. *“There are many angles to keep in mind in conflict resolution: emotions, legal parameters, underlying tensions, etc. Learn how to recognize these aspects and resolve conflicts (even specific language to use).” ~Faculty*

The internal component of managing conflict involves the individual knowing themselves and their typical reactions. *“Often, not always, but often, I think conflicts arise because of ‘stuff’ going on in our heads. I think people often avoid conflict or difficult conversations because of fear or anxiety. I think that being in a good place*

*mentally (and confident in who you are etc.) adds great confidence and calm when it comes to dealing with difficult conversations, situations, and people.” ~Alumni*


Teaching moments can involve recognizing personal responses to stress or conflict and identifying tools to help manage those responses. Having this internal knowledge can help prevent new employees from reacting poorly, or not addressing the conflict at all. Without personal emotions clouding the conversation, conflict can be talked about in a way that is constructive. *“The main thing students should be taught is that conflict in the workplace should not be taken personally – it’s work after all. This is easier said than done. However, once the individual develops this skill, the work environment is much easier to deal with. Instead of becoming upset due to conflict (or criticism), students should see to turn the scenario into an opportunity to solve a problem or improve a process.” ~Alumni*

#### **CONFLICT THEME 4:**


##### ***Individual characteristics - Growth through practice.***

Dealing with conflict constructively does not necessarily come naturally or easily, but the important thing is to keep trying. As one employer explained, *“Real world- I was sent to a week-long training on how to deal with and manage conflict in the workplace. After the training, and dealing with conflicting personalities in my employees, I’m still learning how to manage it. Ultimately, practice makes perfect.”* Learning to manage





***“Real world- I was sent to a week-long training on how to deal with and manage conflict in the workplace. After the training, and dealing with conflicting personalities in my employees, I’m still learning how to manage it. Ultimately, practice makes perfect.” ~EMPLOYER***



conflict very often starts on the playground and continues throughout life, gradually building a conflict navigation toolkit. *“I’m at a point in my job where I see working through conflict as an opportunity for me to grow in my communication skills. Sometimes you have to be thrown right into it to understand how you’ll react and how you can calmly work through conflict.”* ~Alumni Every conversation or interaction may not go perfectly; patience and empathy with others can keep a poor attempt at managing conflict from turning into a disastrous one. *“Learning how to be honest, direct, compassionate and the understanding that sometimes it may feel awkward.”* ~Alumni The ability to come back to the table when a conversation did not go as planned is part of the growth process.

A mature attitude was identified as a characteristic essential for working through conflict. *“Some students want to work hard, develop relationships, question and debate topics in class, and strive to be better people. Other students show up to class in their pajamas.”* ~Faculty Time spent at university is prime for this evolution toward growth and maturity. *“Understanding your long-term goal will have an effect on how you can deal with conflict in the field. Instead of being beaten down by conflict, people who are comfortable in their goals will look for a solution.”* ~Student

Respondents indicated that they notice conflict avoidance amongst new employees due to lack of experience. Parental overprotection creates an environment where young adults have not had the opportunity to practice working through conflict. *“Parents need to stay out of it! (full disclosure, I work in higher education; specifically, in student conduct and residential life). This generation has not experienced conflict, or if they have, their parents tried to head it off as much as possible. Some of this process is educating parents, but also it is about educating students. They often choose to ignore these issues until they are at such a breaking point that violence happens or that the relationship is irreparable.”* ~Faculty It is to the student’s advantage for caring adults to allow some of these lessons to be learned organically during youth when the stakes are lower.

Another potential cause for inexperience in navigating conflict is an increase in technology use. The technology available today has decreased the volume of face-to-face conversations, resulting in a lack of common social interaction skills. *“People are so different in how they observe and identify conflicts. I am convinced that the computer environment has hastened this situation.”* ~Faculty



#### CONFLICT THEME 5:

##### *Experiences - Extracurricular groups and teams are essential.*

Extracurricular groups are of particular value in learning to navigate conflict. Student government, competition teams, debate teams, service organizations and sports naturally provide students opportunities to practice navigating conflict. These experiences are often more valuable than any conflict management lesson that could be taught in a classroom. *“Teamwork is not the absence of conflict, it is the joint acceptance of a goal. Resolution of conflict starts with playground drama and continues through group efforts, clubs, and vocations.”*  
~Employer

Extracurricular groups increase the social interactions that develop maturity and emotional intelligence. Participation helps young people build their self-esteem, develop empathy, and learn how to be a productive member of a team. *“Best is to learn via student run organizational groups. Encourage these groups to make its own decisions and allow them opportunities to grow. Internal conflicts will happen and this allows students to experience cooperation in a group setting to reach common goals.”* ~Alumni

Being a positive team member is essential for healthy, effective professional relationships. *“In my industry, 70% of the output of my division is derived from group efforts. Poor team players get left behind or let go because they drag the rest of the production down. Resilience for conflict resolution and knowing yourself are other items that should be developed [while in college].”* ~Alumni For employers, an employee who is prone to characteristics that can destroy a team is not the type of person they want working in their office. *“Gossip and talking about people behind their back, creating drama and dividing teams...those are all reasons why I would let someone go from my team. It doesn’t matter how great their skills are – if they have a bad attitude then I don’t want them on my team.”* ~Alumni

*“Some students want to work hard, develop relationships, question and debate topics in class, and strive to be better people. Other students show up to class in their pajamas.”*

~FACULTY

## Summary of Key Takeaways for Navigating Conflict

### 1 BREAKING THE CONFLICT TABOO AND ENGAGING CONSTRUCTIVELY.

Students and new employees should:

- Learn how to open the discussion and engage appropriately.
- Understand how to identify types and levels of conflict.
- Realize that conflict can be constructive or destructive.

### 2 PRACTICE!

Students and new employees should:

- Participate in extracurricular experiences.
- Partake in team projects in the classroom and the workplace.
- Appreciate that dealing well with conflict often results in rewards.
- Discover that practice builds self-esteem, empathy, and the ability to see the bigger picture.

### 3 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE.

Students and new employees should:

- Understand the new employee role in the workplace along with the limits of individual influence and hierarchal structure of a workplace.
- Manage emotional responses and notice that it is not always personal.
- Recognize difficult people, difficult situations and destructive behaviors.

# CONFLICT

# DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

## Reflection on the Qualitative Analysis Process

Responses to the open-ended questions on navigating persistence, ambiguity, change and conflict provided a rich pool of insights, ideas and lessons learned from experience. The qualitative analysis process - from code book development to NVivo coding to webinar presentations to writing the report text - was undertaken with respect to the richness of the responses provided by the employers, alumni, faculty and students. The quotes used in this text are just a sampling of the responses, but hopefully capture the spirit of many.



During the content analysis, recurring code themes were identified within each question and the top five code themes captured the bulk of the comments. Some of the code themes did emerge within multiple questions. An example is life transitions is an important theme in both navigating persistence and navigating ambiguity. Diving deeper in the meaning of the code theme is where the differences become apparent. For example, in navigating persistence it is about starting at the bottom in each transition phase to a new place or group of people. In navigating ambiguity, it is about recognizing that much of life is ambiguous, especially during transitions.

From the top five code themes for each question, a series of key takeaways was synthesized. These are ideas that resonated clearly across the data as important and insightful for navigating persistence, ambiguity, change or conflict. The takeaways are intended to spur conversations about how universities and employers can assist young people as they develop the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. All of the takeaways will require hands-on practice, repetition over a lifetime, and an increasing level of challenge and complexity to develop a depth of skill.

## Connecting Threads

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*“The skills identified in this survey have a common thread of being in touch with reality and thriving in situations when, not if, the unexpected happens. They also emphasize the ability to connect with others and to approach employment with a mindset of growth. I would rate myself as average in many of the skills, as far as preparedness, and above average in a select few. However, there are a few of the critical ones, such as dealing with failure, change, relationships, and criticism, that I am a bit more unsure of. I feel that I have yet to test my metal on many of these skills in a more real-life and complex situation, and that I feel less than adequate in my maturity of dealing with problems regarding a much larger responsibility beyond myself. In some ways, I think these skills are only ones that can be developed in the presence of adversity, and when one is in an environment where such adversity is lacking, desired growth will not be obtained. I believe that often our education system coddles students and opts to not prioritize the importance of learning and failures in favor of jumping through hoops and passing classes, which I find sad. Grade inflation is also a sad thing to me in school, and I think further dampens the development of these skills. Mass education is not a guarantee of an educated and critically thinking population. It is up to the individual to attain true education of the mind, and honing of the skills listed.” ~Student*

The code themes provide a broad, or high level, view for identifying connecting threads across persistence, ambiguity, change and conflict (Table 2). The chart can be read across for themes connecting with multiple challenge areas, or down for themes connecting with a specific challenge. As the student observed, the connections are grounded in being in touch with reality and an awareness that needing to navigate these challenges will occur. *“The delta between an expectation and reality is the zone of disappointment. This is best managed by involving a mentor/manager in the development of realistic expectations.” ~Employer* What can educators and employers do to assist young people in their academic and career pathways and reduce the “zone of disappointment”? One-to-one mentorship is extremely valuable, but not always a realistic expectation, in university or in industry, for navigating students through the myriad issues they will face. The take-aways and themes can provide ideas for exploring potential approaches, whether they be structured by the institution (educator or employer) or initiated by the individual.

The themes of Orientation to the Workplace and Experiences occurred in three of the challenge areas: navigating persistence, change and conflict. Addressing these themes in



classes, employee orientation sessions, or outside activities may provide focus for where to apply limited resources or time. Critical elements of Orientation to the Workplace include: clarifying expectations about what an entry-level job is like and the importance of a positive attitude to develop persistence, understanding change is normal and to be expected, and the importance of understanding the employer's expectations and boundaries of the job to avoid conflict in perceptions of role in the workplace. Experiences can also support navigating the challenges by: starting work early in life and working in diverse jobs to foster persistence in the workplace, venturing outside of the comfort zone to gain skills for navigating changing environments and situations, and participating in extra-curricular groups or teams to practice managing interpersonal conflict.

Five of the themes occurred in two challenge areas. Understanding that during shifts, such as from academic setting to the workplace, there is an element of starting over again at the ground floor (persistence) in the group or organization and that things will be unclear or with fewer directions provided upfront in a new environment (ambiguity) can support navigating Life Transitions. Learning to grapple with failure as a positive experience for growth (persistence) and building self-awareness to understand personal reactions and responses to situations (change) are Coping

Mechanisms for navigating challenges. Several respondents mentioned a range of interpersonal Relationships, such as mentors as a key support element for sticking with a situation (persistence) and seeking out relationships with diverse people to build empathy and understanding for navigating perceived conflicts.

The themes of Knowledge Evolution and Independent Thinking processes both emerged as ways to navigate ambiguity and change. Recognizing there are multiple ways to frame a problem assists with accepting ambiguity in a situation and foundational knowledge can provide a solid starting place when things are changing. When the path forward is ambiguous, this can be an opportunity to use creative thinking. When things are changing, ambiguity can be a chance to test previously unexplored avenues.

Two themes connected specifically with ambiguity. These addressed the need to do independent research before asking questions and the importance of breaking down the decision-making process into manageable and identifiable steps. Conflict also had two themes unique to it. One is broad individual character qualities such as using patience and flexibility to practice managing conflict. The other is understanding the situation to identify the level and type of conflict and understanding oneself to identify personal responses to conflict situations.





**Table 2: Theme Occurrence across Persistence, Ambiguity, Change and Conflict**

Themes from Codebook	#	Persistence	Ambiguity	Change	Conflict
Orientation to the Workplace	3	Expectations & Attitudes		Change IS the Norm	Sometimes one's Job is to do one's Job
Experiences	3	Work: Start Early & Repeat Often		Venture out of the Comfort Zone	Extra-Curricular Groups/Teams are Essential
Life Transitions	2	Proving Grounds & Growing UP	Stay Calm. Carry on.		
Coping Mechanisms	2	Facing Failure & Self Managing		Self-Awareness	
Relationships and Mentoring	2	Getting a Mentor			Building Diverse Relationships
Knowledge Evolution	2		1+1 (Does not Always) = 2	Strength in Foundational Knowledge	
Independent Thinking Processes	2		Opportunity Beyond the Box	Cultivate Curiosity	
Seeking Clarifying Information	1		Do Something, Then Ask		
Development of Decision-making Skills	1		Accept, Frame, Decide, Explain		
Individual Character Qualities	1				Growth through the Opportunity to Practice
Conflict	1				Understand the Situation, Know Oneself



## A Strategic Approach

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One of the core missions of public universities is preparing students to enter the workforce. Understanding and meeting the needs of employers and the skills new graduates will take with them into the workplace is vital when developing curricula and degree programs. *“These [employability] skills need not be major or career specific, but there needs to be a strategic approach to ensuring students know why these are important and how a particular class/activity will help accomplish it.” ~Alumni*

Each university and employer will need to determine their own strategic approach to prepare new graduates for success in the workplace. Most academic leaders believe these skills can be incorporated into academic programs. This research focused on four skills identified by employers as rising concerns:

- Ability to **persist** in a new job,
- Dealing with **ambiguity** in job tasks and workplace expectations,
- Dealing with the pace and content of **change** in the workplace, and
- How to manage **conflict** in the workplace.

The key takeaways from each skill provide a place to start in working with students and new employees. The solution needs to include employers and universities working together. Providing opportunities for students to take courses in other disciplines, incorporating employability skills into the curricula, bringing employers and alumni in to share their experiences, and supporting extra-curricular activities are all potential venues for developing employability skills and things universities could consider. For employers, alumni, faculty and students, a positive attitude will be essential as lifelong learning in these skills must be encouraged to help everyone succeed in the workplace. *“The willingness to learn is as critical as being prepared.” ~ Employer*



*“These [employability] skills need not be major or career specific, but there needs to be a strategic approach to ensuring students know why these are important and how a particular class/activity will help accomplish it.” ~ALUMNI*



**VIEW THE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

[www.aplu.org/Employability-Skills-Executive-Summary](http://www.aplu.org/Employability-Skills-Executive-Summary)

**VIEW EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS NAVIGATING IN THE WORKPLACE:**

[www.aplu.org/Employability-Skills-Navigating-in-the-Workplace](http://www.aplu.org/Employability-Skills-Navigating-in-the-Workplace)

**VIEW EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS CRITICAL GROWTH AREAS:**

[www.aplu.org/Employability-Skills-Critical-Growth-Areas](http://www.aplu.org/Employability-Skills-Critical-Growth-Areas)

**VIEW THE 2011 REPORT:**

[www.aplu.org/Comparative-Analysis-of-Soft-Skills](http://www.aplu.org/Comparative-Analysis-of-Soft-Skills)





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