Connecting the dots
Helping students develop 'transferable' skills

LINDA WHITE
Special to Postmedia Network
Thursday, September 24, 2015

As you begin your college or university studies, you're probably focused on earning your diploma or degree. But in order to be career ready upon graduation, you'll also need to develop a host of "21st century" or "transferable" skills in demand by employers, including creative, critical and analytical thinking skills.

Post-secondary institutions are finding helpful and innovative ways to help students develop both the knowledge and skills needed to eventually launch successful careers.

Queen's University in Kingston, for instance, has developed "major maps" tailored specifically to each undergraduate program. "The maps have sections about the kinds of skills students can develop that are complimentary to their degree through things like volunteering, engaging with their community and doing international experiences," says career counsellor Christine Fader.

A "co-curricular opportunities directory" allows students to search extracurricular opportunities by learning outcomes. Students who want to develop leadership skills, for instance, may choose to volunteer as a peer learning assistant or university issues committee member. Those eager to develop a global perspective can become an Engineers without Borders club member.

Meanwhile, a skills workshop helps students identify the skills they've developed — often unwittingly — and how to communicate those skills to prospective employers, says Fader.

But the pressure to develop transferable skills can be overwhelming. Queen's launched a campaign called "It all adds up" to help students make informed decisions about how best to spend their time. "A lot of students are already doing a lot," says Fader. "It's about helping them understand that what they're doing means something."

George Brown College's school of design also recognizes the importance of helping its students develop hard and soft skills, such as the ability to use social media to promote their work and connect with clients in a meaningful way, how to manage a design project and how to deal with conflict with clients, says special projects co-ordinator Lori Endes.

The school recently launched a gallery-style store called IN that offers students real-world experience. "We have a small line of products developed by students and geared towards students. We focused initially on getting graphic designers to think three-dimensionally about their graphics in an entrepreneurial way," Endes says.

"For example, a pattern-making workshop was applied to wallets. We get students to pitch ideas about the kinds of products they'd like to see in the store." The school hopes to eventually work

with other departments, including fashion and jewelry. "The goal of the IN store is to find the brightest and best student designers out there; incubate them with extra skills and get their work into the world."

Meanwhile, George Brown's office of research and innovation launched a digital badging program last year that will acknowledge students who participate in applied research. Students are rewarded for skills including problem-solving, team-building and the ability to find innovative solutions to industry problems and can display their digital badges in places visible to prospective employers, such as on their LinkedIn or Facebook profiles.

Employability skills 2000+

The Conference Board of Canada says the following "employability skills 2000+" are needed to enter, stay in and progress in the world of work:

- Fundamental skills: Communicate, use numbers, manage information, think and solve problems
- Personal management skills: Demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours, be responsible, be adaptable, learn continuously, work safely
- Teamwork skills: Work with others, participate in projects and tasks

— Source: www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/education/learning-tools/employability-skills.aspx

linda.white@rogers.com