



Project CEO: The Potential Value of Beyond-the-Classroom Experiences for Developing Career Competencies

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Acknowledgments

This white paper explores the impact of co-curricular and other outside-the-classroom experiences on students' development of employment skills. The research included here is based on a collaboration with Adam Peck, Ph.D., of Stephen F. Austin University, where Project CEO was originally conceived.

In addition to Dr. Peck and his team at Stephen F. Austin University, I would like to thank two of our other Member Campuses, the University of Central Florida and Western Michigan University, for their help with the development of this paper.



Kate Griffin

As Director of Campus Success for our South Region, Kate Griffin, M.S., provides leadership to a team of consultants serving those campuses in their use of the Campus Labs® platform. Before coming to Campus Labs, she was an adjunct faculty member and advisor for the Department of General Studies as well as a distance learning mentor within the Center for Alternative Course Delivery at Erie Community College in Buffalo, N.Y. She has extensive experience working in student affairs, such as coordinating new student orientation, developing an academic mentoring program, and advancing the accreditation of a tutor training program. She received her undergraduate degree from the University at Buffalo and her Master's degree in College Student Personnel Administration from Canisius College.

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Introduction: From Campus to Career

With limited resources for on-the-job training, today's employers often prefer college graduates who are "job ready" and can demonstrate competency-based skills, not just knowledge in a specific academic area. To meet this expectation, as well as to justify the rising costs of higher education, colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to prove they can adequately prepare their students for viable careers. This paper presents the Co-Curricular Experience Outcomes project, better known as Project CEO, whose findings can help us explore the question: How can institutions better prepare students to make the transition from their campuses to the career marketplace? Using the annual Job Outlook survey from NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) as a starting point for data collection, Project CEO focuses on student perceptions of skill development and attainment, especially in relation to co-curricular experiences. The research also considers the impact of off-campus employment as well as the first-generation student experience.

About the Project

Project CEO was started at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) in Nacogdoches, Texas. The first rendition highlighted the **ten most desirable skills for new college graduates to possess**, as identified by NACE in its Job Outlook survey.

For Project CEO, students were asked to self-report on two key questions: (1) Did they feel as if they were learning these skills? (2) How and where, in their opinion, was the learning taking place—through classes, co-curricular programs, or both?

After looking at their own data, SFA administrators were curious to see how students at other institutions across the nation were reporting skill development. In the spring of 2014, the university partnered with Campus Labs to offer this study to other Campus Labs Member Campuses. A review of the data collected in this benchmark indicated an apparent relationship between how involved a student is and how likely they are to believe they are developing the employment skills identified in the NACE Job Outlook survey.

To gain greater insight into the self-reporting of these skills, a working group of student affairs assessment professionals from across the country, as well as a consultant from Campus Labs, reviewed the project scope and method to identify areas for improvement. In 2015, the new version of Project CEO was launched. More than 15,000 students from 40 colleges and universities nationwide participated in the expanded survey. It should be noted that the second most desirable skill from the NACE Job Outlook survey was broken into two distinct skills, resulting in a total of eleven skills for Project CEO.

Desirable Skills

NACE Job Outlook - Ten	Project CEO - Eleven
The ability to work in a team structure	Teamwork
The ability to make decisions and solve problems	Decision Making
	Problem Solving
The ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work	Workflow Planning
The ability to verbally communicate with people inside and outside the organization	Verbal Communication
The ability to obtain and process information	Information Processing
The ability to analyze quantitative data	Quantitative Analysis
Technical knowledge related to the job	Career-Specific Knowledge
Proficiency with computer software programs	Computer Software Skills
The ability to write and edit reports	Writing and Editing Reports
The ability to sell to, achieve buy-in from, or influence others	Selling and Influencing

In addition to identifying whether students felt they were gaining career competencies, the new version of Project CEO measured the experiences that students found most impactful in developing these skills, as well as the level of development they felt they had achieved. The survey considered these experiences: classes, internships, co-curricular activities and events, on-campus employment, and off-campus employment. If a student reported gaining a skill in one of these areas, they were then asked to rate their ability using the following scale:

Beginner

I'm just now beginning to acquire this skill

Developing

I am improving in this area

Competent

I do this skill pretty well

Advanced

I am above average at this skill

Expert

Others look to me to teach them this skill

The working group also developed rubrics to coincide with the desirable skills. Instead of reinventing the wheel for each, the group decided to promote the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics for some of the skills and then develop additional rubrics for the rest. These included:

- > **Creating and Editing Written Reports**
- > **Career Knowledge**
- > **Obtaining and Processing Information**
- > **Planning, Organizing, and Prioritizing**
- > **Technology Competency**
- > **Problem Solving and Decision Making**
- > **Influencing and Achieving Buy-In from Others**

Focus Area: Co-Curricular Involvement

By Dr. Adam Peck, Stephen F. Austin University

Many are more familiar with the term *extra-curricular* than the more contemporary term *co-curricular*. The difference in terminology reflects a growing understanding of what students gain from their participation in experiential learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom. In this context, the prefix *extra* means “outside of.” When we use the term *extra-curricular*, we are referring to experiences that are outside of the curriculum that may or may not have any significant educational value. Perhaps this might refer to attendance at activities or sporting events. Although these involvements are meaningful—they help students feel connected to the institution, meet other students, and make productive use of their time—they aren’t necessarily intended to be learning experiences.

When we say *co-curricular* we are saying something very different. We are saying that the experiences in which students are engaged are working in partnership with the curriculum. They are meaningful experiences in and of themselves that contribute to a student’s overall learning and development in college. The research presented in this white paper supports the philosophy that participating in co-curricular experiences is beneficial to students, especially with regard to preparing them with skills desired by employers. In the study, we defined co-curricular involvement as “participation in organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, or academic groups/honor societies.” This definition was designed to mirror the definition of involvement in the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#).

Our data revealed that outside of the classroom, no other experience that we studied made as big of an impact on students’ perceived development of skills desired by employers as did participation in co-curricular activities. When we asked what opportunities outside of the classroom helped students develop employment skills, the most common answer in more than half of the areas we studied was co-curricular experiences. These included teamwork, decision making, problem solving, verbal communication, obtaining and processing information, as well as planning, organizing, and prioritizing work.

Even in those areas for which they had the least impact, co-curricular experiences still made a considerable difference. In areas like career-specific knowledge, writing and editing, as well as the ability to sell to or influence others, students reported that co-curricular experiences were a rich area of learning related to these skills. This was particularly important for selling and influencing, a skill that students were mostly likely to say they were not gaining through coursework. An area like computer skills also presented an opportunity. Nearly one-fifth of the students responding to the survey indicated that they had not developed computer skills from college classes. Learning from co-curricular experiences was comparable to learning in other areas with regard to how much students perceived them as being able to teach computer skills. Finding ways to impact computer skills through co-curricular experiences could help institutions close this gap.

If co-curricular experiences contribute to the development of skills, one would expect that as students participate over time, their skills would likewise improve. We tested this notion by asking students to rate themselves in each of the eleven skills we studied. We then looked at what sorts of experiences they had participated in, and for how long. In the six skills most impacted by co-curricular involvement, the self-rated mean score for each skill was higher for involved students than uninvolved students and higher among student leaders compared to those who were merely participating in co-curricular activities. In other words, the more deeply involved a student was, the higher their self-reported mean score was.

We also considered how their degree of involvement influenced their perceptions of learning. Involved students were asked to select the category that best described them. The choices were:

- > **Somewhat involved in a single organization**
- > **Somewhat involved in multiple organizations**
- > **Very involved in a single organization**
- > **Very involved in multiple organizations**

For the six areas that co-curricular activities impacted the most, the average response for students who were somewhat involved in one organization was the lowest, followed by students who were somewhat involved in multiple organizations, and then students who were very involved in one organization. The highest average response came from students who were very involved in multiple organizations. We hasten to note that there are many good reasons not to get overly involved in multiple organizations, so these findings are *not* a recommendation that every student take this approach (especially if they can't handle it). But our findings do suggest that while both breadth and depth of involvement matters, perhaps depth matters just a bit more. In most cases, the average self-rating of students who were somewhat involved in multiple organizations was similar to the average self-rating of those who identified as very involved in one. This suggests that the perceived development of skills is perhaps attributable not only to the quantity of experiences, but to the quality as well. To view these findings, please refer to [page 18](#).

Dr. Adam Peck is Assistant Vice President and Dean of Student Affairs at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He also serves as Graduate Faculty in SFA's Higher Education and Student Affairs program. After earning degrees from Lewis University and Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, he earned a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at Austin. He currently serves as President of the Texas Association of College and University Student Personnel Administrators and as the State Director for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). He is a former chair of the Texas Deans of Students Council.

Bibliography: Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Focus Area: First-Generation Students

By Dr. Shannon LaCount, Campus Labs

First-generation college students are an increasingly significant, yet under-studied, population for higher education. Significant because they are a growing demographic in the general student body and they bring a cultural perspective different from that of the traditional 18-year-old, first-year student with parents and family members who have completed the four-year college experience. Under-studied because there is no standard method to capture who is a first-generation student, much less an agree upon a definition of *first-generation*.

Simply defined, a first-generation student is one for whom neither parent (or guardian) has a four-year degree. Research about this group often points out specific demographic differences between them and their non-first-generation peers. Common characteristics attributed to first-generation students suggest they are typically older, belong to an ethnic minority group, are more likely to live at home or off-campus, come from low-income households, and speak a first language other than English. Reports also suggest first-generation students tend to work full time and enroll in either part-time or non-bachelor's programs at higher rates than their non-first-generation peers.

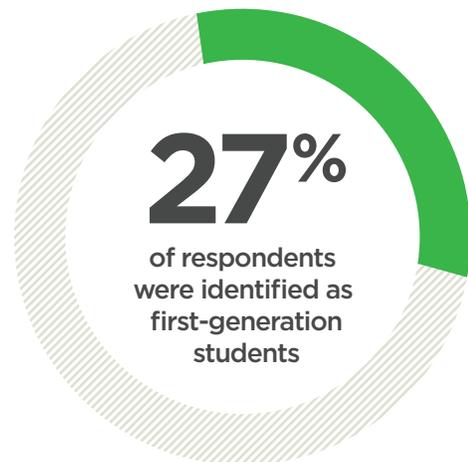
In our survey, respondents were identified as first-generation based on their answers to two questions:

1 What was the highest level of education completed by your parent/mother/guardian?

2 What was the highest level of education completed by your parent/father/guardian?

Any student who answered "Did not complete high school," "High school," or "Unknown" for both questions was considered a first-generation student. Out of all the respondents to our survey, 27 percent were identified as first-generation.

Included in our findings on [page 20](#) is a comparison of responses from first-generation students to those of their non-first-generation peers. These data points represent the self-reported skill attainment from those who answered "yes" to having participated in co-curricular activities, on-campus jobs, and/or off-campus jobs. A review of the data indicates clear patterns in how the first-generation group reported skill attainment.



Compared to the non-first-generation responses, data from the first-generation group indicates skill attainment at lower rates for all eleven skills in both co-curricular experiences and on-campus jobs. Conversely, the first-generation group self-reported skill attainment from off-campus jobs at higher rates than their peers. Again, this was true for all eleven skills.

These results leave us with more questions than answers—as is often the case when discussing first-generation students as a group—and create opportunities for further study. Questions for future research include:

- > **Did first-generation respondents report greater skill attainment from off-campus jobs versus other experiences outside the classroom because they work off-campus at higher rates and therefore have more opportunity to gain skills in these settings? Or, are they participating in all three settings equally, but gaining more skills from the off-campus jobs?**
- > **If, as suggested by our data, first-generation students tend to work off-campus more than on-campus and are participating in fewer co-curricular activities, what is the reason?**
- > **Is there opportunity to build on this momentum and help working students acquire even more skills?**
- > **Do first-generation students actually participate in co-curricular opportunities at a lower frequency than the general population? If so, as is suggested by our data, why is this the case?**
- > **If rich, frequent, co-curricular participation is most beneficial for skills attainment, how can we support first-generation and other students who work off-campus and encourage them to participate in more co-curricular experiences?**
- > **If first-generation students participate in co-curricular activities at the same rate but report less skills attainment from the experience, why is this?**

Our two final questions highlight the general approach to studying first-generation students: Is it appropriate? Are we making too many assumptions? For example, while first-generation students often come from lower socioeconomic households, it is not true they all do. In fact, financial status, not first-generation status, may dictate whether or not a student has an off-campus job. The patterns in the data are promising and suggest we are looking in the right places if we want to support student success in higher education, but we need to carefully consider our results and build on what we know.

Dr. Shannon LaCount is Director of Campus Success. Her career in higher education before joining Campus Labs includes eight years of teaching experience as a clinical and classroom professor in Communication Sciences and Disorders and five years as Director of Student Learning Assessment at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD), where she led a campus-wide assessment process for academic departments and student life programs. She has also participated in advising events and undergraduate research at UMD, as well as consultations and professional development events as a Teagle Assessment Scholar with the Wabash College Center of Inquiry. She has a Master's degree in Speech-language Pathology from the University at Buffalo and a Doctorate in Education from the University of Minnesota.

Project Participants and Findings

A total of 40 institutions participated in the survey nationwide, and responses came from more than 15,000 students. The participating institutions can be broken down by type, size, graduation rate, and cost.

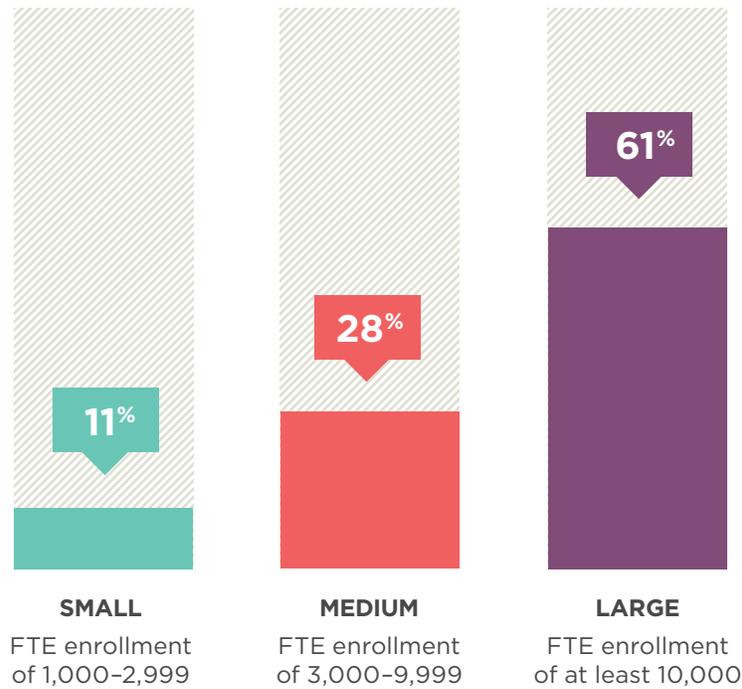
The following are the most notable findings from our research, as reflected within these main topics:

- > **Comparison by Race and Ethnicity**
- > **Comparison by Gender and Class Status**
- > **Self-Reported Desirable Skills**
- > **Average Self-Reported Ability by Overall Involvement**
- > **Where Skills Are Learned: All Students**
- > **Where Skills Are Learned: First-Generation vs. All Other Students**

About the Participants: Type and Size of Institutions

All were four-year institutions, with large, public universities comprising the majority.

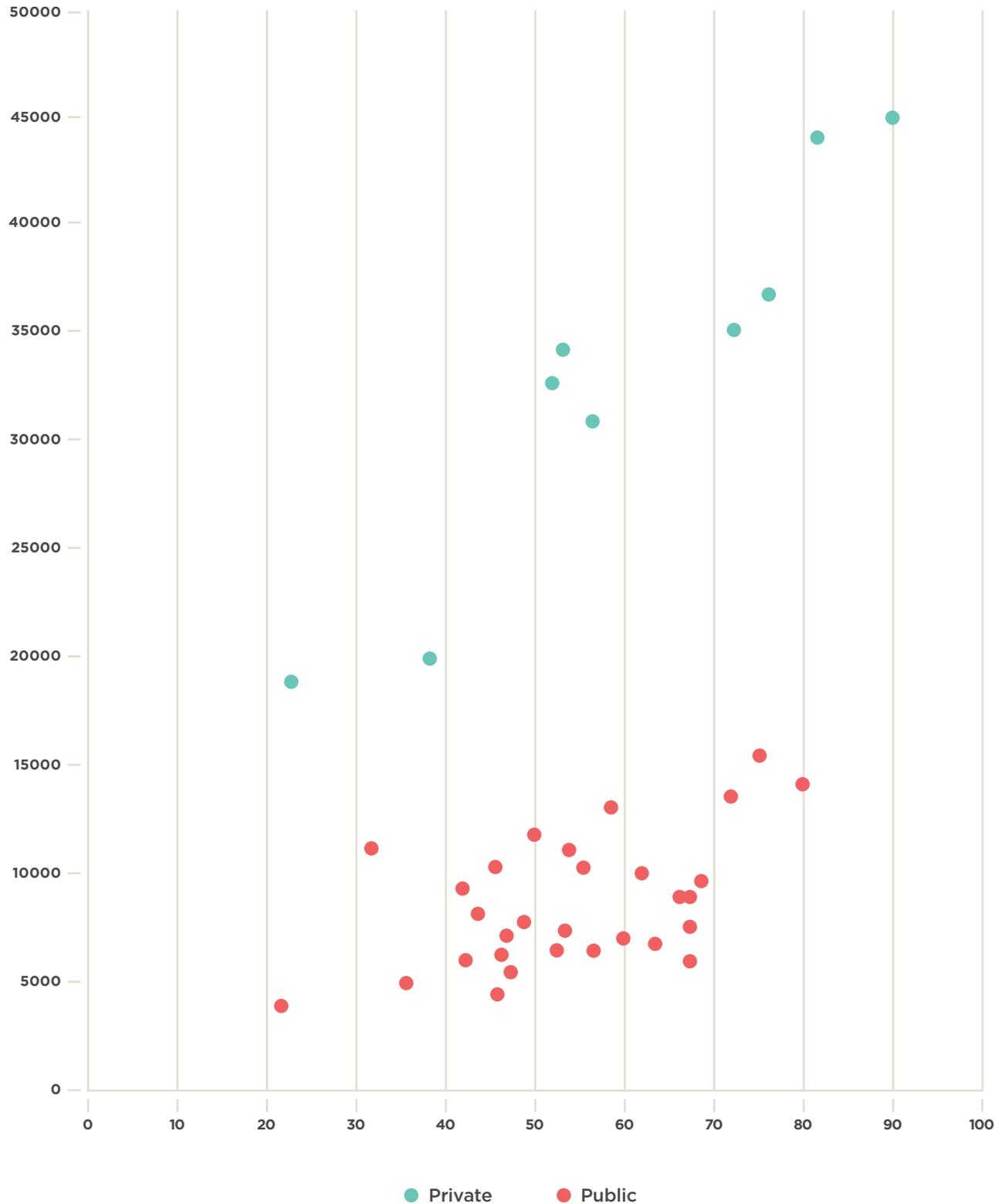
Question for further reflection: How do you think your institution's type and size affect the overall learning and skill development of your students?



About the Participants: Graduation Rate vs. Cost

In terms of both graduation rates and cost, public institutions are relatively consistent with each other. For private institutions, graduation rates and cost vary from school to school.

Question for further reflection: How well-prepared are your students by the time they graduate?



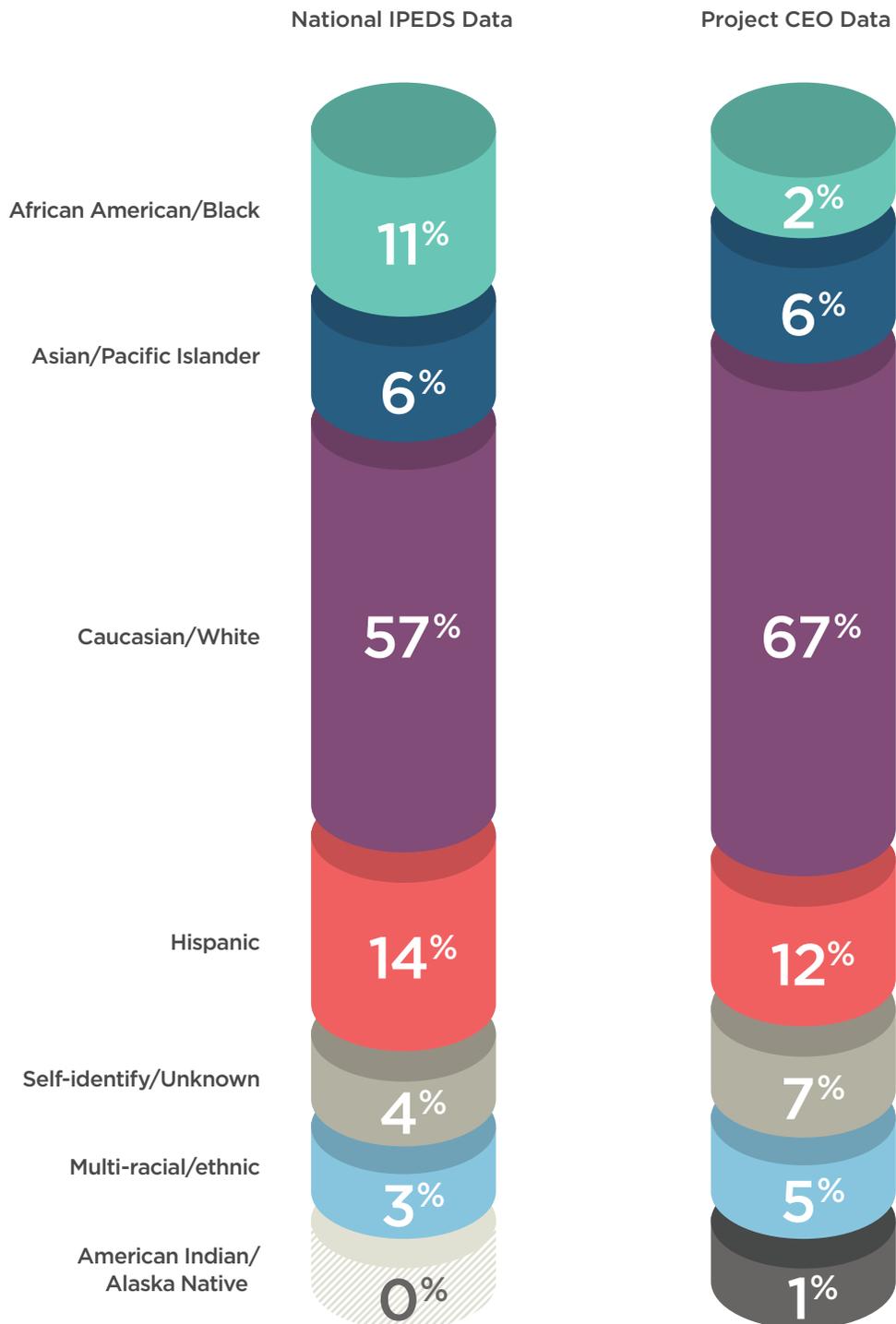
Findings: Comparison by Race and Ethnicity

Although the data sets are comparable, there are significant differences for two of the student groupings. Project CEO yielded a much smaller sample of African-American/Black students and a much greater sample of Caucasian/White students.

Questions for further reflection:

How diverse is the student body at your institution?

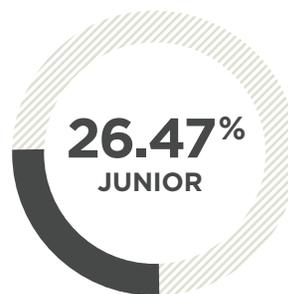
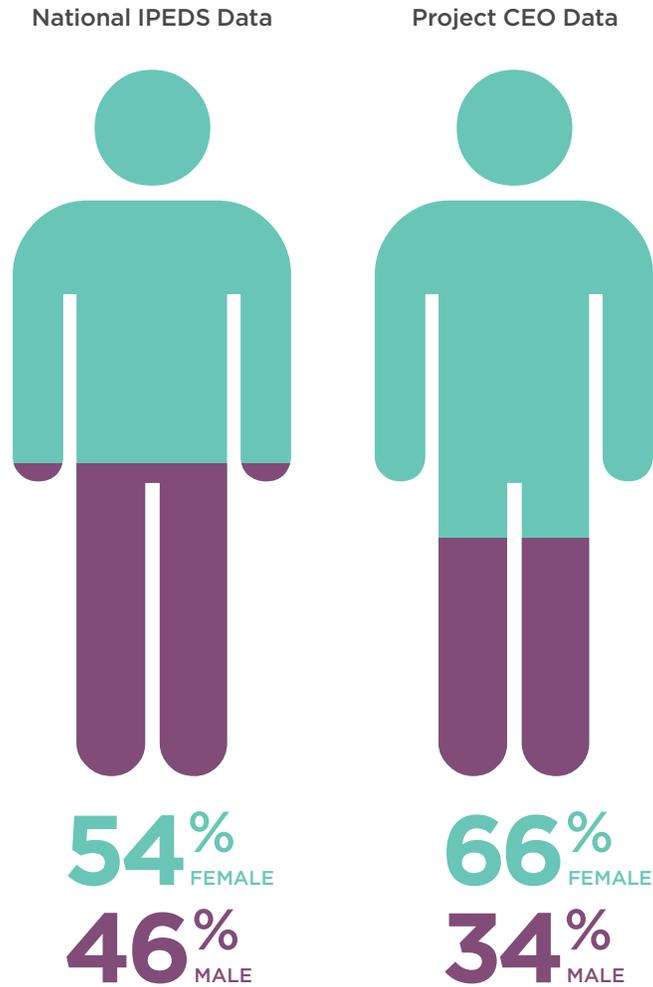
What steps can you take to capture the voices of a diverse student body?



Findings: Comparison by Race and Ethnicity

Compared to national IPEDS data, Project CEO had a higher rate of female respondents.

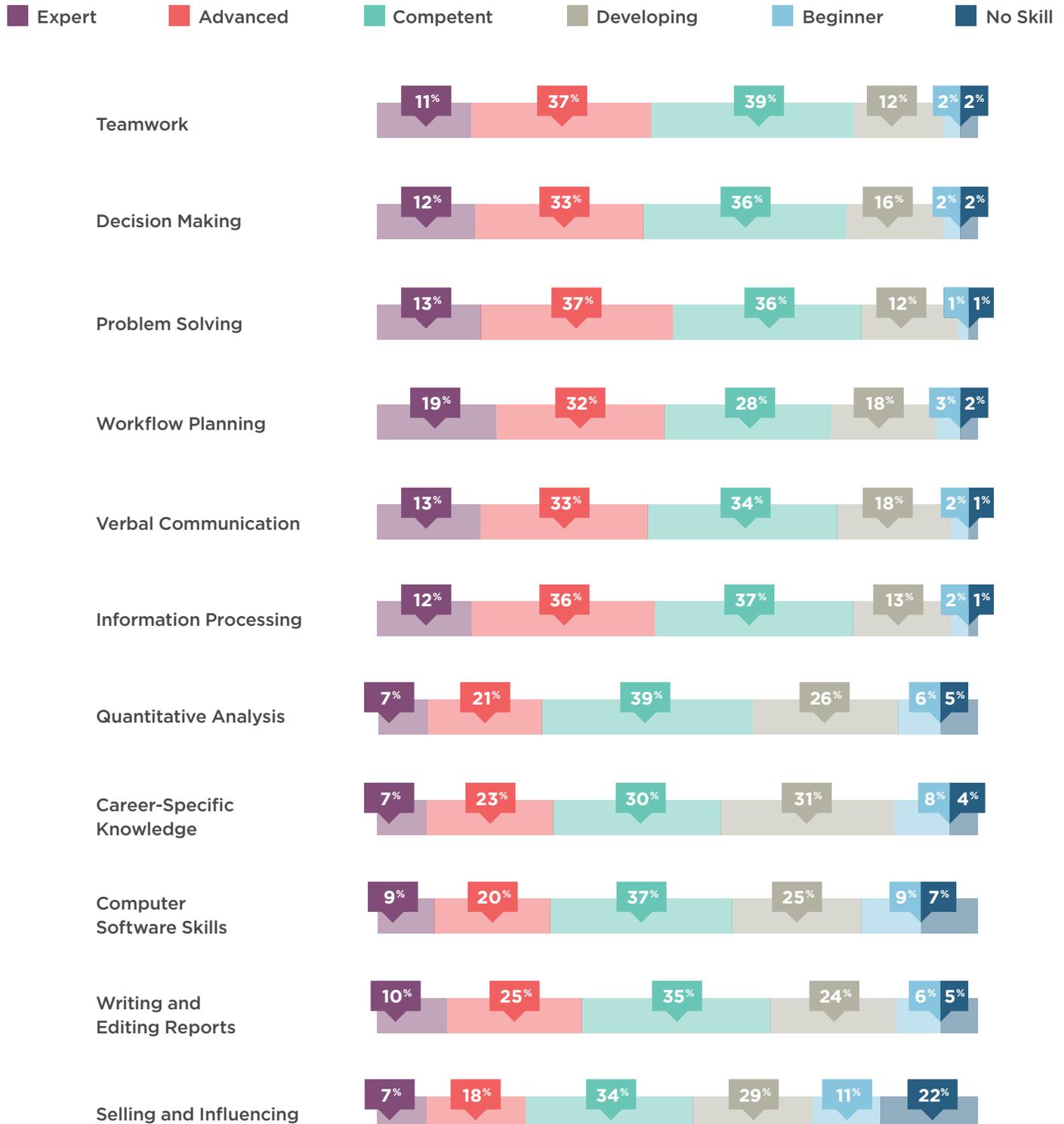
Question for further reflection: How can your institution increase junior- and senior-year access to experiences that will help prepare students for the post-graduation job search?



Findings: Self-Reported Desirable Skills

The highest reports of being an Expert were for the skill of **Workflow Planning**. The skill of **Selling and Influencing** had the highest percentage of Beginner responses as well as the highest report of No Skill responses.

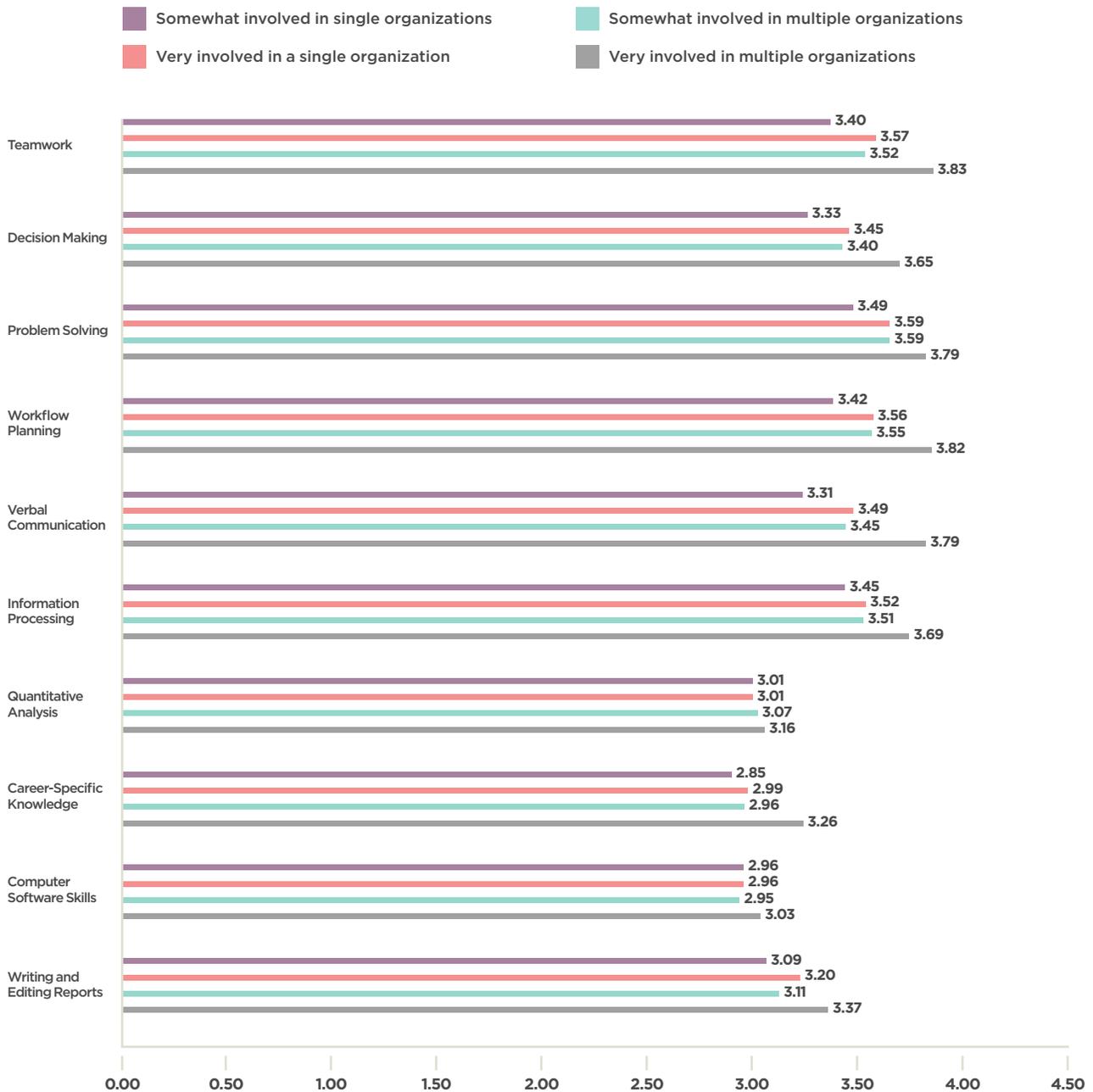
Question for further reflection: At your institution, how do you think student perceptions of desirable skills compare to employer perceptions?



Findings: Average Self-Reported Ability by Overall Involvement

Most students who said they were involved reported their involvement level as “Somewhat involved in multiple organizations.” The average response of skill reporting was the highest for students who identified themselves as being “Very involved in multiple organizations.”

Question for further reflection: How can your institution better integrate career competencies into involvement opportunities on campus?



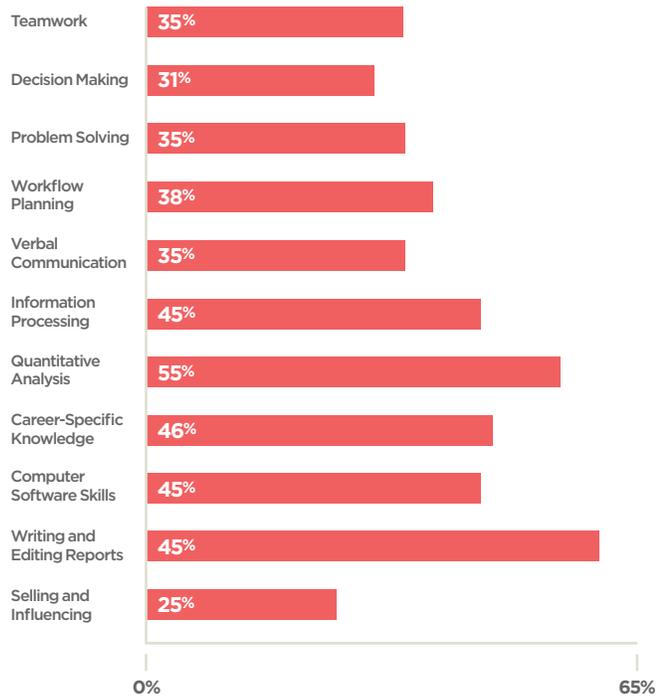
Findings: Where Skills Are Learned – All Students

For each skill, responses are filtered by students who reported that experience.

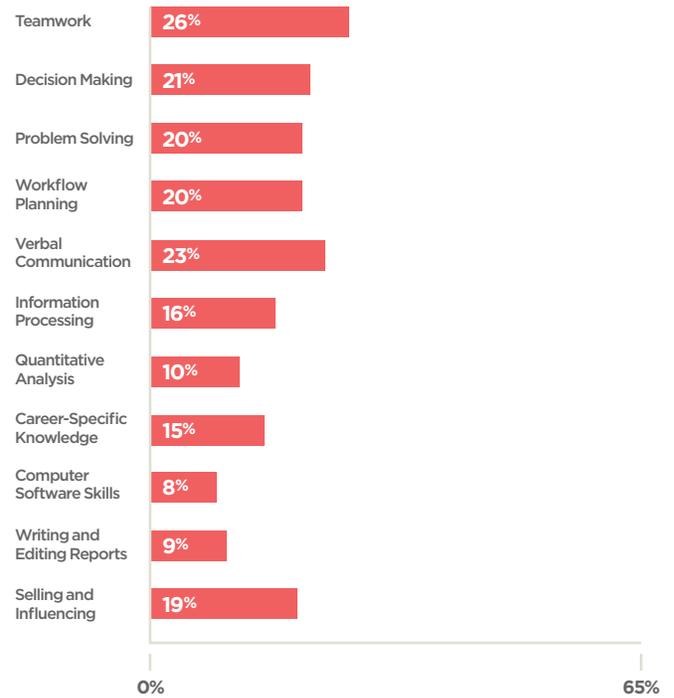
Questions for further reflection:

*Given the varying levels of skill attainment, what are the implications for experiential, classroom, and co-curricular education?
How can an institution maximize the benefits of on-campus employment experiences for students?*

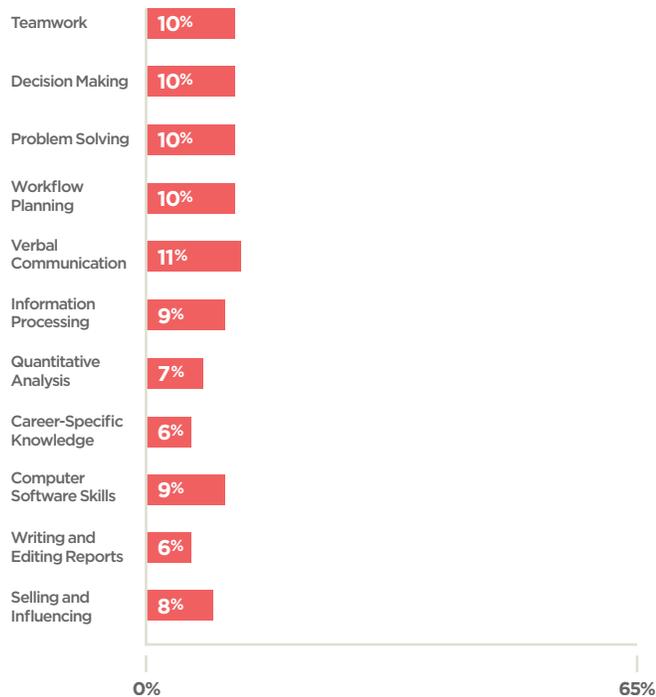
Classes



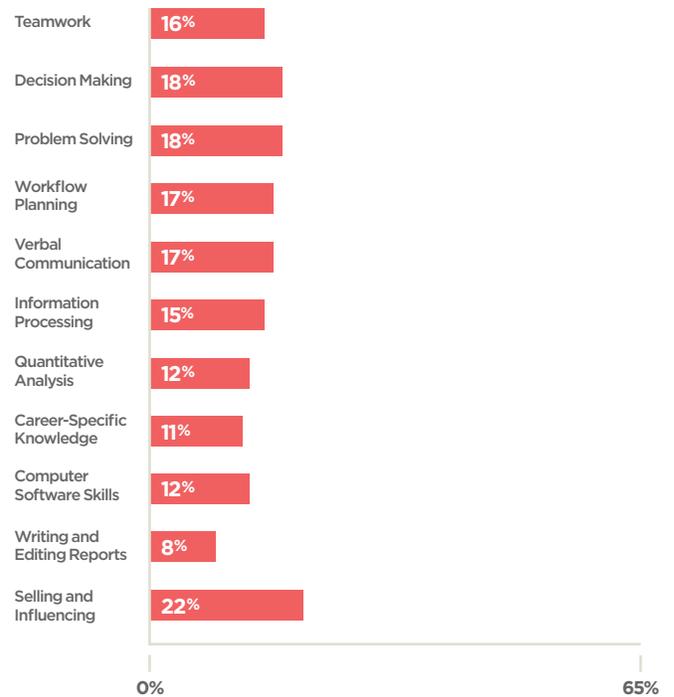
Co-curricular



Job (on-campus)



Job (off-campus)



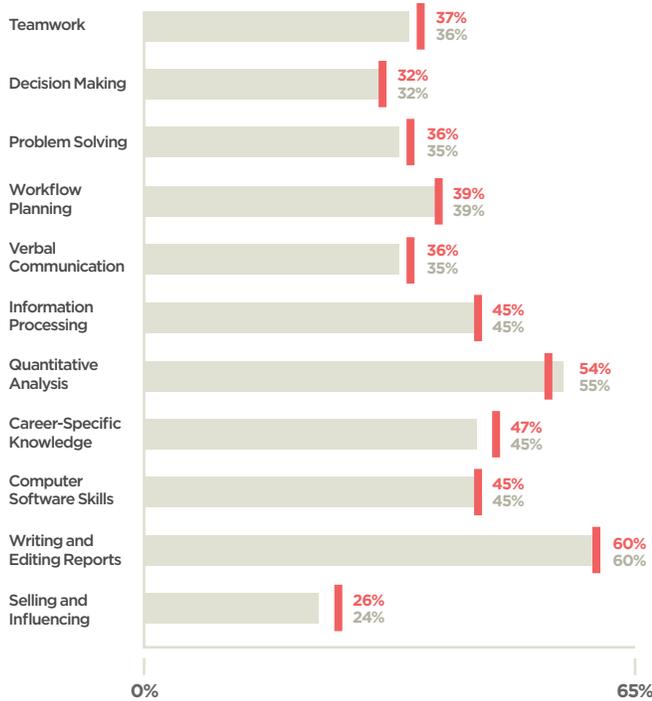
Findings: Where Skills Are Learned - First-Generation vs. All Other Students

More first-generation students are reporting skill development through off-campus employment than all students combined. The highest-reported skill was **Selling and Influencing**. First-generation students also reported a lower incidence of skill development through co-curricular experiences compared to all other students combined.

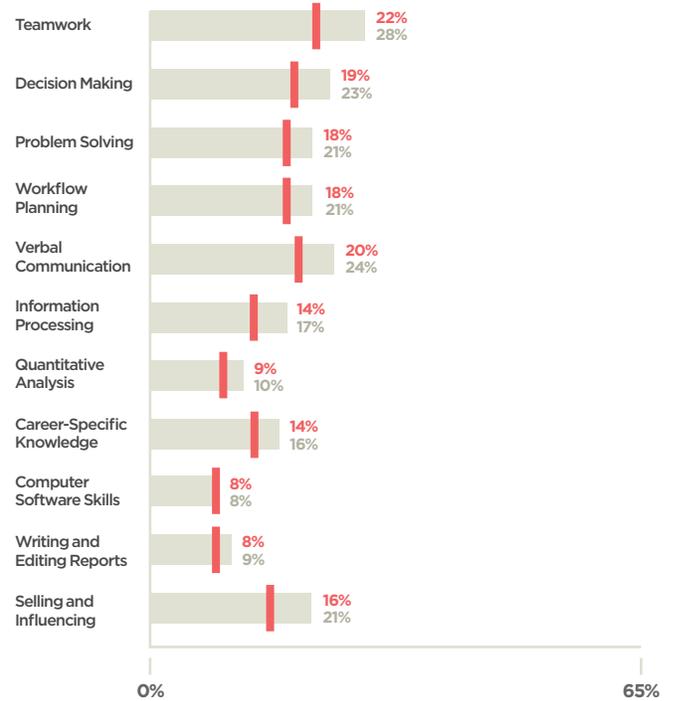
Question for further reflection: What does this mean for the ways we support first-generation students on campus?

■ First-Generation Students ■ All Other Students

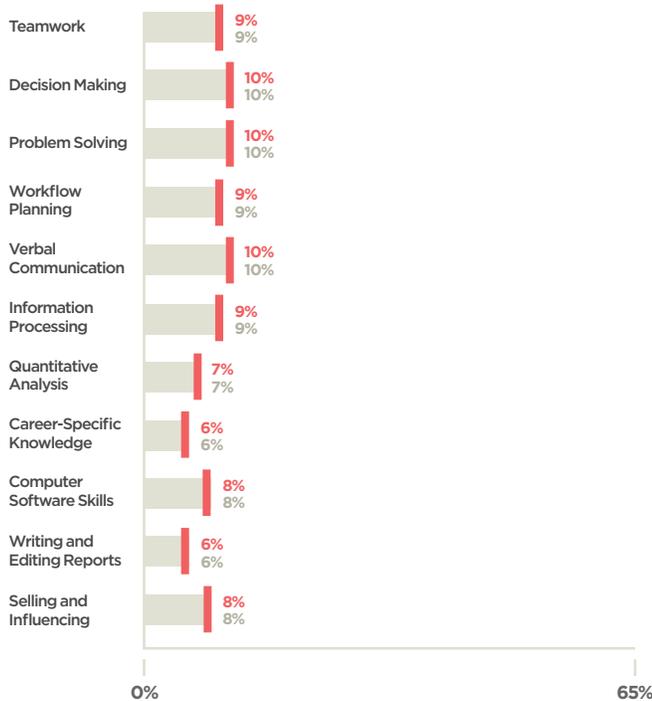
Classes



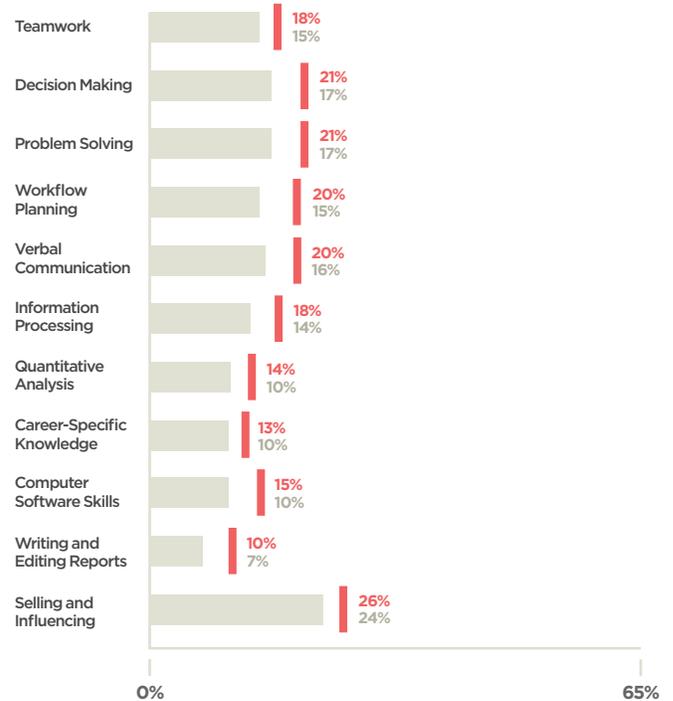
Co-curricular



Job (on-campus)



Job (off-campus)



Case Study: Western Michigan University

Location: Kalamazoo, Michigan

Enrollment: 17,195 Undergraduate Full-Time Enrollment

Type of Institution: Public Research University

Contact: Anne E. Lundquist, Ph.D.

Director, Student Affairs Strategic Planning and Assessment

Instructor, Educational Leadership, Research and Technology



WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



“ We are using the results, in part, to support our Higher Learning Commission Accreditation Quality Initiative – the Signature Program – a personalized student pathway to synthesize and translate students’ experiences in and out of the classroom into lifelong learning and engagement. The Signature Program helps students integrate their WMU experiences to uniquely define themselves as scholars, professionals, leaders, and globally engaged citizens. ”

Anne E. Lundquist, Ph.D.

Background

Western Michigan University’s decision to participate in Project CEO was serendipitous. WMU’s newly unveiled [divisional strategic plan](#) included a strategic initiative focused on student engagement, and Anne E. Lundquist, Ph.D., Director of Student Affairs Strategic Planning and Assessment, instantly saw the opportunity to connect Project CEO data to this initiative. To get started, Lundquist pitched the idea to members of the strategy team who were focused on the university’s student engagement strategic initiative. This group included staff from the offices of Student Leadership, University Recreation, Residence Life, Student Conduct, and Career Services. Like Lundquist, the group saw the instant connection between the project and the details of their initiative. They quickly identified who should be in the sample, when they should administer the survey, as well as what additional questions (if any) they should ask. The group also recognized this data set as a good addition to the card swiping data the Student Activities Office was starting to collect. The practice of tracking attendance at events was then a new concept for this group; it has since continued to expand quickly on campus. The group would like a better general understanding of how WMU students engage on campus, what types of skills they gain as a result of these experiences, and what types of learning they receive.

In addition to the connection to their student engagement initiative, the WMU team has found that Project CEO aligned nicely with the institution’s framework for learning and operational excellence outcomes.

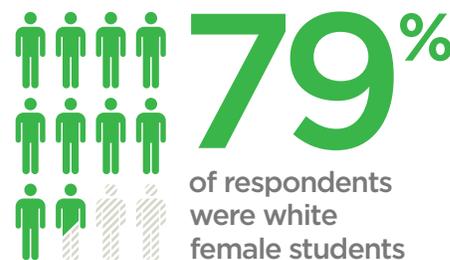
Western Michigan Division of Student Affairs Learning Outcomes			
Learning Outcomes	Domains		
Personal Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Realistic self-appraisal > Personal wellness > Resiliency > Reflective thinking > Critical thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Creative thinking > Inquiry and analysis > Integrative learning > Oral communication > Listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Problem solving > Effective decision-making > Cultural competence > Career exploration and development
Interpersonal Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Ability to influence others > Teamwork/collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Leadership > Conflict resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Adaptability/flexibility > Intercultural competence
Social Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Civic engagement > Social justice advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Ethical reasoning > Global perspective 	

This framework informs the development of division, department, program, and activity outcomes along with assessment. This year the data set from Project CEO, in addition to other projects, is being used as a measurement for some of the domains being assessed.

Both the strategic plan and outcomes framework have given the Student Affairs division a much more focused and selective approach to data collection. Participating in Project CEO was a strategic decision supported by everyone in the division.

What the data revealed

WMU launched Project CEO in March 2015 and collected data for about a month. The sample was roughly 4,000 students pulled from the full-time undergraduate student population. One of the most noticeable trends related to who typically responds to campus surveys. For Project CEO, almost 79 percent of the respondents were white female students, a trend that, according to Dr. Lundquist,



is consistent with some of the larger-scale assessment projects on campus. WMU’s assessment committee is now exploring ways to gather data from underrepresented groups on campus, as well as diversify the types of events they offer on campus. The need to make campus programming efforts appeal to more diverse groups of students was confirmed through attendance tracking data that was captured through card swipes using Campus Labs® CollegiateLink.

The WMU assessment team has also started to discuss whether or not students truly understand what is meant by the term *co-curricular*. The team assumed student reports of learning in co-curricular experiences would be higher, especially for the skill of teamwork.

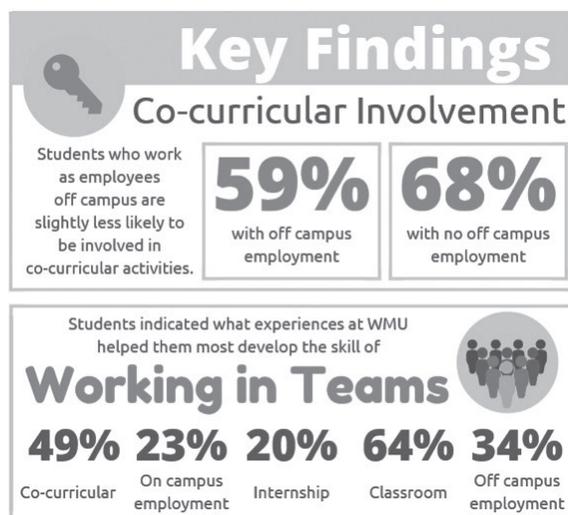
Additionally, the assessment team was surprised by the number of students who reported skill development through off-campus employment experiences. Even more surprising was the fact that participation in off-campus employment was reported more often than campus employment. The WMU team plans to dig further into this finding as they continue to discuss the data on campus. Lundquist wants to identify ways to make on-campus employment more meaningful and to educate students on the learning experiences they can gain from student employment.

How has the data been used on campus?

Western Michigan University has started a series on campus called Data Dialogues. The series focuses on reviewing and discussing projects, including Project CEO, that can help WMU build organizational and individual competence in analyzing results.

By sharing the results, WMU can also close the loop on assessment. In addition to sharing the data during the series, the WMU Student Affairs team created an infographic to report their overall findings from the project around campus.

The team at Western Michigan University continues to be pioneers in student affairs assessment. Dr. Lundquist also states: “We are using the results, in part, to support our Higher Learning Commission Accreditation Quality Initiative – the Signature Program – a personalized student pathway to synthesize and translate students’ experiences in and out of the classroom into lifelong learning and engagement. The Signature Program helps students integrate their WMU experiences to uniquely define themselves as scholars, professionals, leaders, and globally engaged citizens.” Lundquist and her colleagues are excited to continue to identify way they’ll be able to leverage Project CEO Data to support continuous improvement of the student experience on the WMU campus.



An example of some of the data included in the infographic created by the WMU Student Affairs team

Case Study: University of Central Florida

Location: Orlando, Florida

Enrollment: 45,138 Undergraduate Full-Time Enrollment

Type of Institution: Public Research University

Contact: Michael Preston Ed.D.

Executive Director

Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities



883
student
responses

“ *The theory here is that if students are given these opportunities in a format they understand – not as an extracurricular activity but an extension of their curricular pursuits – they will put in just as much effort.* ”

Michael Preston, Ed.D.

Background

The University of Central Florida's decision to participate in Project CEO started with a conversation around student learning outcomes. Administrators wanted to find out whether student participation in co-curricular programs increased their post-graduation employment prospects. The team at UCF reached out to over 100 gainfully employed graduates to ask them about the skills they had acquired outside the classroom as UCF students. The response was overwhelming. Many alumni reflected on the fact that now that they were employed, they could appreciate the value of their co-curricular experiences. The graduates also stated that as students, they never realized just how well these experiences would prepare them for their current work. Shortly after this initiative, Michael Preston, Director of Student Involvement at UCF, was approached by Dr. Adam Peck at Stephen F. Austin University to participate in Project CEO.

The Office of Student Involvement spearheaded Project CEO, which integrated nicely with some of the ongoing assessment initiatives at UCF. Under the auspices of Student Involvement, the Student Success Committee was tasked with looking into whether or not students were thriving on campus. One key resource that has promise for integrating student engagement with academic outcomes is the Pegasus Path, an online interface for students to keep track of experiences that could help them thrive at UCF. The Pegasus Path is on track to become a vital tool for the university's Student Success Initiatives (SSI).

Project CEO, meanwhile, organically became a parallel project. Dr. Preston's team was able to integrate data from Project CEO into the university's SSI Project. In the Project CEO survey, students were asked not only if they felt they had acquired a particular skill, but also where and how. The responses provided a purposeful data point to add to UCF's Student Success Outcomes.

Project CEO was launched in January 2015. The Student Involvement team administered the survey to students who had completed over 30 hours of coursework. The decision was to exclude freshmen as well as "fresh transfers," since students from these groups were still getting acclimated to life at UCF. A total of 883 survey respondents yielded a data set with sufficient statistical power.

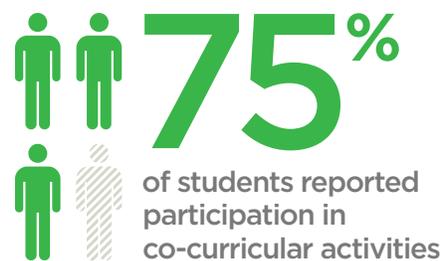
What the data revealed

First, the data reinforced the idea that, to paraphrase the African proverb, it does take a village to make students successful. "The classroom is important and we can see that students highly report skill development in this space on campus, but we need to encourage out-of-the-classroom experiences as well," Dr. Preston explained. "Our faculty are seeing the value in these experiences and are supporting the concept that learning is happening both inside and outside of the classroom. With that being said, we in Student Affairs also need to support the concept that the classroom is a better spot for some of these skills to be developed. How can we (Student Affairs) do a better job in supporting this? "

Almost **75 percent of the students reported that they participated in co-curricular activities on campus.**

Respondents also rated co-curricular activities as the most important experience for developing the skills of teamwork and verbal communication, as well as the ability to influence or sell to others. The survey results also revealed areas for improvement. Students identified computer proficiency and career-specific knowledge as two skill

areas for which co-curricular experiences played a minor role. As a result of Project CEO, administrators at UCF are now able to identify the specific skills students believe they acquire through co-curricular programming and to what level of proficiency. This was not information the administrative staff had been able to identify through their informal outreach before Project CEO.



How has the data been used on campus?

The data gathered through the survey reinforced the importance of students being active participants in campus life. To encourage student involvement, the UCF moved its Involvement Center into the bustling Student Union. Centrally located, the Student Union is the ideal location for the office, as it gives staff from the Office of Student Involvement more opportunities to connect with students and offer group education.

The study also inspired the UCF team to reframe some of the more intense student leadership experiences on campus. Instead of writing traditional job descriptions, UCF administrators now present the leadership opportunities more like class syllabi. This gives students a greater awareness of the learning goals and expected outcomes at the beginning of the year. Students are also given fixed report dates for assignments to showcase their learning, and are required to meet with advisors to discuss their progress. “The theory here is that if students are given these opportunities in a format they understand – not as an extracurricular activity but an extension of their curricular pursuits – they will put in just as much effort,” Preston explained. The revised format has also helped students develop the skills needed for a successful job interview, where they typically have to reflect on and articulate their job-related strengths.

In July 2015 Dr. Preston accepted the position of Executive Director for the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities. This consortium, which includes Florida International University (Miami), the University of Central Florida (Orlando) and the University of South Florida (Tampa), aims to produce more career-ready graduates with lower debt, better training, and adaptable skill sets. Preston plans to continue to support Project CEO and hopes to integrate it into his work with the consortium as it heavily supports its mission.

Case Study: Stephen F. Austin University

Location: Nacogdoches, TX

Enrollment: 10,055 Undergraduate Full-Time Enrollment

Type of Institution: Midsize Four-Year Public University

Contact: Adam Peck, Ph.D.

Assistant Vice President and Dean of Student Affairs
Graduate Faculty in Student Affairs



1,300
student
responses

“ Our instrument helps to determine what skills students feel they are gaining the most from their co-curricular experiences so practitioners know where to dig more deeply. ”

Adam Peck, Ph.D.

Background

As the founding member of Project CEO, Stephen F. Austin University has been the driving force behind its continued development. Even before launching the project on campus, administrators were reviewing the importance of co-curricular experiences for students. But when two pieces of information came together, the idea for a formal project came to fruition.

Immediately after Dr. Adam Peck, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, came across the Job Outlook report produced by NACE, he was intrigued and the gears started to churn. Reviewing the list of skills, Peck identified quite a bit of overlap with conversations he and his colleagues had been having about student learning outcomes within their co-curricular experiences. SFA administrators wanted to get a sense of where students felt they were gaining these skills and thought a survey would be a great starting point. Peck compared Project CEO to a divining rod. “A divining rod is an instrument that is fabled to help find water so a well can be dug to contain it, usually in water-parched areas,” he explained. “Our instrument helps to determine what skills students feel they are gaining the most from their co-curricular experiences so practitioners know where to dig more deeply.” Peck has always advocated that students pick meaningful involvements on campus. It’s these very experiences that expose students to skills that can help them achieve their professional goals.

Like his peers at other institutions of higher ed, Dr. Peck wears many hats on campus. Not only does he serve as Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students for Student Affairs, he also coordinates assessment for the division. When Peck first had the idea for Project CEO, he sat down with the current SFA vice president, Steve Westbrook, to discuss assessment initiatives for the year. Peck brought up the Job Outlook survey and SFA's focus on program-level outcomes. The two agreed that there was a connection – Project CEO would be a great way to make their outcomes more relevant to their stakeholders on campus. In addition to focusing on program-level outcomes, SFA was in the process of revamping its leadership program. Peck saw an opportunity to integrate the Job Outlook leadership skills into the program as well. The overhauled leadership program would now be organized around 6 out of the 10 skills identified in the Job Outlook survey.

What the data revealed

At the end of January 2015, SFA launched the survey to its entire student population. Data was collected for a little over a month, during which close to 1,300 students responded. While the response rate among classes was pretty even, the seniors responded at the highest rate.

What best describes your class status?



One of the most intriguing discoveries centered on the untapped potential for off-campus employment. Almost 32 percent of respondents reported that they had off-campus employment.

Did you work as an employee off-campus this year?



It was confirmed that working off-campus presents both challenges and opportunities for students. They're working more hours while going to school full-time, but they have opportunities to interact with off-campus employers and develop their job skills. Since SFA has strong ties to the Nacogdoches community, the opportunities are especially meaningful for students.

Peck was frankly surprised by some of the skill attainment levels reported in the national dataset. He thought that the co-curricular experiences would have made a bigger impact on skill development. Specifically, he expected to see a more dramatic impact in the area of "Working in Teams" since this is something he feels students in leadership positions in co-curricular activities are exposed to. Additionally, he was even more shocked that off-campus jobs were perceived as more impactful than on-campus jobs. As Dr. Peck explained, "We would assume that having a job on campus would have an advantage of exposing students to skill development and education, but maybe we have less expectations for students working in an on-campus job." He suggested the need to identify all potential learning opportunities available through on-campus employment.

How has the data been used on campus?

The data collected through this project has been a catalyst for revamping the required training for student workers. Training is now structured around the NACE skills used as an evaluation point in Project CEO. With this new alignment, students have a clear concept of the skills they should develop during training.

In addition to this change, both the leadership programs and Career Services Office on campus are identifying ways they can utilize the data set. SFA's Greek Life organizations are also starting to imagine how they might use these skill definitions to showcase the educational benefits of participating in a sorority or fraternity.

Recently, Dr. Peck was invited to present to SFA's Board of Regents, whose members seldom hear about the impact that co-curricular activities have on student learning. This group found the data compelling, and Peck was encouraged by their enthusiasm. "It made them think about what we (Student Affairs) does in a new way," he explained.

Dr. Peck is enthusiastic and proud of the recognition Project CEO has received. He plans to dive deeper into the skill development opportunities that lie within off-campus employment opportunities at Stephen F. Austin. Excited for the next stage of the project, he continues to spread the word about the importance of co-curricular experiences.

Conclusion

In 2016 Project CEO was honored by NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) with a Silver NASPA Excellence Award in the category of “Administrative, Assessment, Information Technology, Fundraising, Professional Development and Related.” While humbled by this recognition, we realize that our work is only part of a much broader conversation for higher education – one that involves stakeholders beyond student affairs professionals. In fact, while the data can help us infer ways to improve co-curricular programming, it also nudges us to consider other questions: How can institutions strive to do a better job of closing the gap between academic learning and outside-the-classroom opportunities? How can we help all students have a more holistic approach to their entire campus experience?

We are inspired to continue the work of benchmarking outcomes through Project CEO. Our goal is to help institutions better understand their students’ perceptions of skill-based opportunities, strengthen their campus-wide co-curricular offerings, and offer their students a meaningful education for career and lifelong success.

Member Campuses interested in participating in a future Project CEO benchmarking study should contact their Campus Labs consultant. **If your institution is not currently a Member Campus and you would like more information about Project CEO, contact info@campuslabs.com.**

Campus Labs empowers institutions to make valuable connections with their data. We offer a complete set of integrated solutions for areas such as assessment, retention, teaching and learning, student engagement, and institutional effectiveness. We’re proud to serve more than 1,000 public and private colleges and universities. To learn more, visit campuslabs.com.

Appendix

Participating Institutions

Assumption College
Project CEO 2015

Bowling Green State University
Project CEO 2015

California State University–Chico
Project CEO 2015

California State University–
Northridge
Project CEO 2015

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University–
Daytona Beach
Project CEO 2015

Faulkner University
Project CEO 2015

Fordham University
Project CEO 2015

Fort Hays State University
Project CEO 2015

Illinois State University
Project CEO 2015

Kean University
Project CEO 2015

Langston University
Project CEO 2015

Missouri State University
Project CEO 2015

Northern State University
Project CEO 2015

Rutgers-New Brunswick
Project CEO 2015

Saint Peter's University
Project CEO 2015

Southeastern University
Project CEO 2015

Stephen F. Austin
State University
Project CEO 2015

SUNY Brockport
Project CEO 2015

SUNY Farmingdale
Project CEO 2015

SUNY Fredonia
Project CEO 2015

Texas Christian University
Project CEO 2015

University at Albany
Project CEO 2015

University of Central Florida
Project CEO 2015

University of Kansas
Project CEO 2015

University of Memphis
Project CEO 2015

University of Minnesota–Duluth
Project CEO 2015

University of Montana
Project CEO 2015

University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Project CEO 2015

University of New Haven
Project CEO 2015

University of Utah
Project CEO 2015

University of Vermont
Project CEO 2015

University of West Florida
Project CEO 2015

University of Wisconsin–
Milwaukee
Project CEO 2015

University of Wisconsin–
Platteville
Project CEO 2015

Villanova University
Project CEO 2015

Wayne State University
Project CEO 2015

Weber State University
Project CEO 2015

Western Michigan University
Project CEO 2015

Western Washington University
Project CEO 2015

William Paterson University
Project CEO 2015