Global Competencies, Liberal Studies, and the Needs of Employers

David Schejbal
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

George Irvine
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

For many Americans, September 11, 2001, was a cognitive and emotional turning point. In the days and months after that fateful day, some people focused inwardly and saw all non-Americans as suspect and dangerous. Others focused outwardly and believed that greater international integration and knowledge of other cultures were essential for moving forward and for preventing another disaster like the one that the country had just experienced. Although this period did not mark the beginning of interest in global skills or competencies, it significantly heightened that interest and brought the issues much more into mainstream academic and business conversations.

Although many value proficiency in international skills, the concept of international skills or global competencies is at best vague. There is no agreed-upon definition—not even a clear working definition—and different interest groups identify various skills as the important global competencies.

In the following article, we focus on three issues. First, we explore the concept of global competencies in order to give some definition or parameters to the concept. What we find is that global competencies and traditional liberal arts competencies comprise two significantly overlapping though not identical sets of skills. Armed with this information, we ask employers

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to rank various competencies so that we can identify what employers deem important in employee skills. The second part of this article is devoted to that study and its results. In the third section, we explore how information from the study and our examination of global competencies might be used to adjust existing or build new curricula for broad workforce development.

WHAT ARE GLOBAL COMPETENCIES?

There is no clear, agreed-upon definition of global competency or one list of global competencies that comprises a standard. Many colleges and universities, organizations, and employers have developed their own lists of skill sets or measures of what it means to be able to work efficiently and well within a global context. Some experts have offered the following working definitions of what it means to be globally competent:

- a grasp of global systems, global issues, the dynamics of how things are interrelated and interconnected in the world, and how society can best address global issues (Ron Moffatt, Director of the San Diego State University International Student Center);
- the skills to listen, observe and evaluate, analyze, interpret, and relate (Darla K. Deardorff, Director of the Duke University International Education Administrators Association); and
- the ability to be fluent in at least one other language, such as Spanish or Mandarin; fluency with e-commerce and the Internet; a well-versed knowledge of geography; and, maybe most important, some knowledge of the political and cultural history of one or two countries or regions outside of Western Europe (Carol Conway, Director of the Southern Global Strategies Council).

Although there is no standard definition for what it means to be globally competent, as we reviewed the literature and what various institutions and organizations identify as global competencies, we found similarities and common themes coming to the surface. It should be noted that most of the competencies in the following list have been offered by institutions of higher education or by nonprofit organizations. Businesses focus less on these competencies, and as our survey research below suggests, find global competencies less important than other types of competencies. In other words, nonprofit institutions tend to value multicultural and international competencies more than for-profit institutions, although there are many exceptions.

We place global competencies in three general categories: knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively within an international context. This list is by no means exhaustive, and every institution will have its own ranking of the competencies below. Information in list below comes from a number of sources, including Michigan State University, the World Health Organization, NASSCOM (trade body and the chamber of commerce of the IT and business process outsourcing industries in India); Satyam Computer Service, the American Council on Education Center for International Initiatives, and others.

What is instructive about this list is that to be globally competent requires not only a certain skill set, but also a broad and externally-focused attitudinal and intellectual perspective:

Knowledge
- knowledge of world geography
- awareness of the complexity and interdependence of world events and issues
- understanding of historical forces that have shaped the current world system
- knowledge of one's own culture and history
- knowledge of effective communication, including knowledge of a foreign language, intercultural communication concepts, and international business etiquette
- understanding of the diversity found in the world in terms of values, beliefs, ideas, and worldviews

Attitudes
- openness to learning and a positive orientation to new opportunities, ideas, and ways of thinking
- ability to manage ambiguity and pressure in a self-reflective way and to use criticism as a growth opportunity
- strong interest in learning at multiple levels and in seeking opportunities for continuous learning and professional growth
- orientation toward action and commitment to achieving outcomes
- sensitivity and respect for personal and cultural differences
- empathy or the ability to take multiple perspectives; ability and desire to work constructively with people of all backgrounds and orientations

- self-awareness and self-esteem about one's own identity and culture
- positive outlook about the future and proactive engagement in the world: initiative, enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, courage, self-reliance, self-control, independence, perseverance, creativity, flexibility, assertiveness, sense of humor

Skills (general)
- technical skills (i.e., research skills) that enhance the ability of students to learn about the world
- critical and comparative thinking skills, including the ability to think creatively and integrate knowledge, rather than uncritical acceptance of knowledge
- communication skills: ability to express oneself clearly in conversations and interactions with others; listen actively; produce effective written communications; ensure that information is shared; use another language effectively to interact with people from other cultures; establish rapport quickly; work effectively as a part of a multinational/multicultural team
- coping and resiliency skills in unfamiliar and challenging situations, e.g., multicultural settings with a diverse range of personalities and learning styles
- learning through listening and observing
- effectiveness and astuteness when working in cross-cultural settings
- leadership skills: confidence in motivating staff to meet challenges and achieve objectives and in promoting ownership and responsibility for desired outcomes at all levels
- ability to identify and use synergies across organizations and with external partners

When we overlay the skills onto attitudes and knowledge, we find interesting clusters emerging. The following might serve as the foundational definitions of global competencies essential in any curriculum:
- *Self-reliance, resiliency, and ability to cope with and thrive in dynamic and rapidly changing environments*. These skills are closely tied to a positive and open attitude toward the world. Such skills and attitudes are often based on knowledge about the global context. The more a person knows about the world, and the more experiences he or she has had in the international arena, the more comfortable,

skilled, and emotionally resilient that individual is likely to be in multidimensional contexts.

- *Ability to think critically and quickly, to learn readily, and to be able to apply new knowledge expeditiously and effectively.* Like self-reliance, resiliency, and ability to cope, this skill set is significantly strengthened if it is coupled with a positive attitude toward interpersonal contact and sensitivity for interpersonal differences, as well as knowledge of other cultures, beliefs, and ideas. Empathy—the ability to accept multiple perspectives, and the desire to work constructively with people of all backgrounds and orientations—is also part of the attitudinal foundation for this skill set.

- *Excellent communication skills.* These are essential and indispensable in nearly all contexts, but in multicultural and international contexts communication can be very difficult and easily misunderstood. Like the other competencies, excellent communication rests on an attitudinal foundation based on openness and being goal-oriented (i.e., the achievement of goals depends on the ability to communicate effectively). Intercultural communication is made much easier if linguistic and cultural barriers are overcome, so knowledge of other cultures and the ability to speak other languages is a significant asset when communicating in a global context.

In addition, as shown in the next section, American organizations rank these three foundational global competencies at the top of their list of critical competencies and consider them essential for improving productivity and competitiveness.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES OF GLOBAL AND GENERAL COMPETENCIES

In March and April 2009, the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) Professional Development Committee on Global Literacy surveyed 85 businesses, organizations, and state government agencies in the mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and far-west regions to better understand which competencies American organizations believe their employees should have in order to compete in the twenty-first century. Survey recipients included owner/operators of companies, executive officers responsible for human resources or training and development, trade association managers, and state agency officials. The committee was particularly interested in deter-

mining the relative importance employers gave to 34 generally recognized competencies in three skill areas: functional and technical competencies, such as accounting, finance, and computer skills; general competencies, such as critical thinking, management, and communication skills; and international and intercultural skills, such as foreign language, cross-cultural understanding, and international awareness. Though the number of survey recipients was limited, the survey results provide useful data about which competencies American employers want their current and future employees to have in order to increase organizational effectiveness and competitiveness.

In general, the survey results indicate that American employers consider functional, technical, and general competencies as being slightly more valuable for employees to possess than international and intercultural competencies.

Survey Responses
Tables 1, 2, and 3 below list the competencies in descending order of importance, sorted by the mean score of each competency. Organizations were asked to rank each competency using a 1 to 5 scale where 1 signifies not important and 5 signifies very important. (It should be noted that the majority of the respondents to the survey were from the private sector and were based in the mid-Atlantic and northeast regions.)

Competency	Mean Score
General technology and computer skills	4.92
Project management skills	4.69
Basic business acumen (management, accounting, marketing, product development)	4.62
Performance management skills (including continuous improvement through monitoring)	4.54
Advanced technology and computer skills	4.08
Mathematical analysis	3.69
Advanced business acumen (finance, mergers, acquisitions, international business)	3.54
Statistical analysis	3.46
Using scientific rules and methods to solve problems	3.15
Engineering skills	2.92

Table 1. Functional/Technical competencies

As indicated in Table 1, it is clear that organizations value general technology and computer skills, project and performance management, and basic business acumen above other competencies. The higher level of variance in the lower-ranked competencies indicates that the degree to which organizations value these competencies in their workers depends on the nature of the organization's business.

Competency	Mean Score
Effective communication skills (spoken, written, and listening)	5.00
Problem-solving skills	4.92
Relationship building	4.85
Ethical behavior	4.85
Leadership and management skills	4.77
Conflict management	4.77
Critical thinking	4.77
Emotional intelligence	4.69
Multi-tasking	4.69
Active learning (understanding the implications of new information for both current and future decision-making)	4.62
Innovative (generating and implementing new ideas)	4.46
Creativity (including originality)	4.46

Table 2. General competencies

Table 2 clearly shows that there is far less variance in the ranking of general competencies. It would appear that organizations place greater value (somewhat or very important scores) on all but three of the 12 general competencies listed.

Competency	Mean Score
Understanding the value of cultural diversity	4.31
General openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures	3.92
Cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment	3.85
Ability to work in one or more foreign business cultures	3.69
Knowledge of international affairs	3.69
Understanding the global economic context and the economics of globalization	3.69
Understanding gender differences in other cultures	3.54
Understanding different political systems	3.46
Understanding world geography	3.23
Understanding global environmental issues	3.15
Understanding differences in world religions and the implications of those religions on business practices	3.15
Ability to speak one or more foreign languages	3.00

Table 3. International/Intercultural competencies

The responses in Table 3 illustrate the extent to which opinions vary about the importance of the American workforce having international and intercultural competencies. Most respondents want their employees to understand the value of cultural diversity and intercultural learning, but respondents do not necessarily see the need for foreign language skills in order to be competitive.

If we aggregate the results from all three categories of competencies (Tables 1, 2 and 3), the top 10 competencies that organizations believe the American workforce should have are primarily general competencies, or so-called "soft skills." Although respondents were not asked to compare all 34 competencies against each other, it is informative to aggregate the results to illustrate how much importance organizations place on general competencies, and how relatively less important international and intercultural competencies are. The top 10 list includes:

1. effective communication skills
2. general technology and computer skills
3. problem-solving skills
4. relationship-building skills

5. ethical behavior
6. leadership and management skills
7. conflict management
8. critical thinking
9. project management skills
10. emotional intelligence

When asked to rank the three most important competencies for success from the three tables above or otherwise, respondents provided the feedback contained in Table 4. The competencies that occur most frequently in the responses received are communication skills, leadership skills, business acumen, and critical thinking skills. These results also support the top 10 list above.

1	2	3
Good work ethic	Honesty	
Teamwork skills	Effective communication skills	Engineering skills
Emotional intelligence	Creativity	Global understanding
Written/verbal communication skills	Technology	Decision-making skills
Leadership skills	Critical thinking	Technological skills
Written/verbal communication skills	Technological skills	Innovative skills
Math skills	Reading comprehension	Coping skills
Business acumen	Critical thinking	Effective communication
Understanding of global interactions and relationships to the socio-economical environment	Thinking globally	Communications capability
Leadership	Creative/innovative thinking	Problem-solving skills
Ability to manage a project from beginning to end	Role model leader characteristics	Ethical decision-making capabilities
Written/verbal communication skills	Foundational business acumen skills	Interpersonal relationship skills

Table 4. Three most important competencies from tables above or otherwise

Further proof that organizations value general and functional/technical competencies is found in the responses to two questions about the relative importance of each category to current and new employees. Organizational respondents would like current employees to have equally developed functional/technical and general competencies, while new hires should have slightly more developed general competencies, perhaps because technical competencies can be acquired more easily through in-house or third-party training programs once employees are on the job.

Competencies	Mean Score
Functional/technical competencies	4.75
General competencies	4.75
International/intercultural competencies	3.67

Table 5. Three most important competencies that current employees must have

Competencies	Mean Score
General competencies	4.75
Functional/technical competencies	4.50
International/intercultural competencies	3.75

Table 6. Three most important competencies that new hires must have

Respondents felt that the competencies they need in their employees are largely being met, though not fully, as measured through employee performance and evaluation processes. Eighty-six percent of respondents thought that their employees have the competencies they need to do their jobs, but that there is always room to learn new skills either through in-house or third party training and development programs. Respondents listed the following as sources for employees to gain the competencies they need:

- college degree programs
- employee-sponsored training programs
- employee-sponsored mentoring programs
- degree or non-degree continuing education programs tailored to each employee by the employer
- higher education sought after by employees on their own
- job experience (not training) in the US and abroad
- internal and external training and development opportunities

The UCEA survey also asked respondents to consider in greater detail the international/intercultural competencies that were important to their organization. The committee was interested in showing the relative importance of each of the international/intercultural competencies to the surveyed organizations. Table 7 contains these results, while Table 8 lists how respondents prefer to train employees on international/intercultural competencies.

Competencies	Percentage
Understanding of the value of cultural diversity	100
Behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and motivation	100
General openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures	86
Knowledge of current international affairs	71
Cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment	71
Understanding of the global economic context and the economics of globalization	57
Ability to speak one or more foreign languages	57
Understanding of gender differences in other cultures	57
Ability to work in one or more foreign business cultures	57
Understanding of world geography	43
Understanding of different political systems	43
Understanding of global environmental issues	29
Understanding of differences in world religions and the implications of those religions on business practices	29
Other	0

Table 7. International/Intercultural competencies important to organizations

Method	Percentage
In-house	57
US school	29
School in foreign market	29
Informal training	43
Online program	14
Other	14

Table 8. Preferred method to train employees for international/intercultural competencies

As shown in Table 7, organizations place high value on the competen-

cies "understanding the value of cultural diversity" and "behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations," which are closely followed by "general openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures."

The organizations surveyed prefer to train employees on these competencies through in-house training and other types of employee-development programs (coaching, mentoring, etc.). Those respondents who send their employees abroad for training to develop international/intercultural competencies stated that cultural immersion was the primary factor in why they did so, as opposed to price, proximity to overseas operations, or better learning environment.

CURRICULAR IMPLICATIONS

The general competencies listed by employers as especially important—communication skills, leadership skills, business acumen, and critical thinking skills—also map well onto the global competencies that we distilled from the longer set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge in the first section of this article. Not surprisingly, the ability to communicate well, to reason effectively, and to be effective as a leader are truly global competencies in that they are universal. Nearly anyone able to do those three things well is likely to be successful in most circumstances regardless of culture or geographic location. Hence, it is imperative that all curricula prepare students to do these things very well. These are foundational or core competencies that any higher education graduate should master, and curricula should be structured so that core mastery is both demonstrable and demonstrated.

Looking at competencies from this perspective, the role of technical skills is to help students focus their core abilities in specific subject areas. Computer scientists should be able to communicate effectively inside and outside of their discipline, solve technical and non-technical problems, and lead teams to accomplish an array of tasks. The same is true for biologists, economists, philosophers, and political scientists. It is easy to see how individuals who have excellent core skills and who are able to apply those core skills to topical areas in which they are proficient are likely to be highly successful in their fields. This suggests that the old debate about whether graduates should be generalists or specialists is a bit off the mark. Graduates should be proficient in and able to apply effectively core skills to their areas of expertise. Topical expertise cannot be sacrificed for core skills, but core skills underlie an individual's ability to be successful in

nearly every job.

At this point one might object that it is a bit misleading to suggest that the core skills to which we refer are global competencies. Indeed, these competencies are universally valuable and applicable, but that is not what we mean when we refer to global competencies—knowledge of other cultures, an understanding of other languages, cultural sensitivity, and so on. The universal skill sets are important, but so are these latter skills.

These multicultural and pluralistic skills are important because our society and the way we do business today are inherently multicultural and pluralistic. This was not the case—or at least not recognized as the case—a few decades ago. From a monocultural perspective, a person simply needs to know the norms for effective communication and standards of logic within that culture to succeed quite well; there is no need to understand others culturally different from oneself.

To be an excellent communicator and a nimble thinker in the twenty-first century requires the ability to use those skills in multiple settings and contexts. American society is an amalgam of multiple perspectives, and the nineteenth-century view that assimilation into the prevailing cultural paradigm is what's required is no longer the norm. Furthermore, American workers will be increasingly less likely to work only with other American workers. The means of production, generation of knowledge, and research are done increasingly across and often irrespective of political and cultural boundaries. Hence, in order to prepare to fare well in an increasingly boundary-less climate, one must have a foundational understanding of diverse contexts and settings to know how to apply core competencies in those contexts. For this reason, cultural literacy, geopolitical knowledge, and similar understanding are important. Knowledge in those areas is very helpful in negotiating, working in teams, setting goals, etc., because that knowledge is tremendously useful in being able to communicate effectively and to apply standards of reasoning that fit others' thought patterns. And in the end, being able to do these core things helps one get the job done well, on time, and on budget.

The employer survey does not fully show the importance of global skills because we are still in a period of transition. Large, multinational companies recognize the importance of global skills and perspectives and value them in new employees. Smaller employers that do business in a more limited context do not fully appreciate the utility of an employee's ability to apply core skills in multicultural contexts because their main business

does not yet require that. What does this mean, then, for higher education and especially for continuing education?

Clearly, core skills are essential. We hear repeatedly from employers that what they need most are employees who communicate exceptionally well, and who can communicate industry-specific issues to lay audiences. In addition, we hear that employees must be strong critical thinkers and excellent problem solvers. Hence every educational program should help develop those skills. For adult students who are likely to work mostly for local employers, international skills might not be particularly important at this time; more job-specific or region-specific skills might be more valuable. For young students, however, and for programs that are providing education for individuals who are likely to work in multicultural and dynamic contexts, global knowledge is very important.

In either case, significant attention should be paid to helping students learn how to apply their communication and reasoning skills to the work that they are likely to do. It would be a mistake to assume that topical knowledge and the ability to communicate well and reason effectively automatically means that an individual will be able to communicate and reason well; the process of application must also be taught.

THE ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCE

What is understated in the discussion above but just as important as core skills is the affective component of skill building. An essential part of one's ability to succeed in a rapidly changing, increasingly pluralistic, multicultural context is an attitudinal or emotional approach that enables an individual to function effectively in the midst of uncertainty and opacity. A review of the attitudinal traits in the first section of this article suggests commonalities that help individuals function in uncertain times. For instance, a positive outlook about the future and proactive engagement in the world, initiative, enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, courage, self-reliance, self-control, independence, perseverance, creativity, flexibility, assertiveness, and a sense of humor all contribute to personal resilience and success. These characteristics are just as important for the adult student looking to find another local job as they are for recent graduates who will have to be able to continually renew themselves as they move through multiple career paths. Unfortunately, these affective traits are more difficult to teach and hard to incorporate into a curriculum, though applied and experiential learning programs can help students use what they learn in real situations.

Nevertheless, as we prepare students to function well in the future, we must help them develop their attitudes in these directions, and we must help them cope well with uncertainty and change. An ability to cope in rapidly changing times, coupled with core skills that an individual knows how to apply in multiple contexts will make that individual highly resilient, socially productive, and employable.

CONCLUSION

We began our research by trying to learn what competencies employers find most important. We especially wanted to know if employers value global competencies. As we explored the concept of global competencies, however, we found that at their core, the most important competencies in any context are the ability to communicate very well, to reason and problem solve, and to work well with others. We also found that these competencies are what employers value most. Multicultural and multinational knowledge is important in enabling an individual to apply core skills effectively anywhere, anytime. They may not be as important in predominantly monocultural settings.

We also noted that there is an important attitudinal component to long-term resiliency for individuals. Individuals must not only have excellent core skills, they must also be comfortable in and capable of applying those skills in rapidly changing and uncertain contexts.

Avenues for further research include increasing the number of responders to the survey to confirm initial results and to determine the extent to which geographic location in the US and size and sector of an organization influences the perceived value of the various skills that comprise global competencies. Such research could strengthen workforce training and continuing education programs that build American competitiveness. Given the Obama administration's interest in and funding for improving the country's workforce training infrastructure, such an expanded study might be particularly timely. Additional research might also focus on how core competencies could also be taught to high school dropouts and to GED holders to improve workforce training efforts.

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