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**Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to assist the Academic Programs and Assessment Department at the University of Memphis in completion of the THEC Employer Satisfaction Project. This project and subsequent report is a continuation of the work done in 2003 and 2008, in which the Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of Memphis conducted focus groups with representatives from private and public sector organizations throughout the Memphis community. These focus groups were conducted to help identify characteristics that local employers consider important when hiring and evaluating professional employees.

**Participants**

The Sparks Bureau of Business and Economic Research (SBBER) at the University of Memphis (U of M) conducted a total of seven focus groups, each group associated with a College or School, over the course of six months. Focus groups began in October of 2012 and were completed in March of 2013. Each focus group was held at the U of M and had an average of seven participants. Colleges and Schools participating included; Herff College of Engineering, College of Education, Health, and Human Services, College of Communication and Fine Arts, Loewenberg School of Nursing, College of Arts and Sciences, and Fogelman College of Business and Economics. Two focus groups were conducted for the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences; one for school systems while the other was for employers of non-school related graduates, e.g. Health Science graduates.

Deans of participating Colleges and Schools determined the participants for each group, with assistance from department chairs. The focus groups included participants from private and public sector organizations as well as educators from local school districts. The majority of individuals in these groups had previously hired U of M graduates or currently had U of M graduates working for them. In addition, potential employers of U of M graduates were included in some of the focus groups. For a list of participating organizations, please see the Appendix.
Research Questions

Each focus group included the following research questions:

1. What are the most important skills and talents that employers look for in prospective professional employees?
2. Have U of M graduates developed strong communication skills, problem-solving skills and technical skills?
3. Do U of M graduates exhibit a good work ethic and can you specify areas that need improvement?
4. How do the leadership skills of U of M graduates compare to other colleges and university graduates you hire?
5. Are they adaptable and flexible in new situations?
6. Do they have the ability to work with others?
7. To what degree are the programs current with organizational and industry-wide needs?
8. What skills and knowledge will future graduates need?

Results from Individual Focus Groups

This section contains the results from the seven focus groups that took place at the U of M. The results are broken down by individual group. The following comments represent a summary of the opinions and recommendations of the participants.
Group 1 – Herff College of Engineering

Skills and Talents

The participants in this group included employers from engineering, manufacturing, and medical equipment industries. Employers from this group emphasized the need for graduates to have the following skills: analytical skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, the ability to learn new techniques, and a general understanding of business practices. They also stressed the importance for graduates to have a professional appearance and to have the ability to work in team settings.

Many employers felt that recent graduates were lacking in strong written communication skills. They did emphasize that their oral communication skills were strong. Several employers wondered if recent graduates have had too much exposure to social media which has limited their writing skills. In addition, employers look for employees who are able to ask for help when needed. They stated that many graduates are quick to jump to conclusions and need more experience in the area of problem solving. Employers emphasized the need for internships to help with the development of these skills. Lastly, technical knowledge and an understanding of the field were important to employers. All employers agreed that graduates need more exposure and training on basic tools and engineering programs (for example, Computer Aided Design).

Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility

In the areas of work ethic, flexibility, and leadership, employers said they have noticed a shift in the mentality of young employees. It was felt that younger employees had a sense of entitlement that has led to tardiness and a lack of preparation. Also, most graduates do not seem to be committed to long-term employment with companies.

Overall, employers believed the leadership skills of U of M graduates were good. One employer stressed the importance of Type A personalities for this field of work. In the area of flexibility, employers stated that recent hires were much more adaptable to new situations than older employees and also worked very well with others.
Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis

Most employers said that the University of Memphis has made strong advances in their programs and are focusing on areas that are relative to industry needs. Some felt that the U of M lacked emphasis on modern programming skills and traditional trade skills. Employers feel that students need to be taught traditional trade skills, along with computer and software skills. One employer suggested that the U of M should focus on quality techniques to ensure students are making the best possible products. Many employers advised that there is a need for more formal internship programs through the U of M. Currently, students are able to set up internships with the assistance of their professors, but employers would like to see a more formal program offered through the College. Internships could offer students exposure to real world experience and industry experience.

Future Skills and Knowledge

Graduates will need extensive training in engineering programs, communication and organizational skills, presentation skills and leadership skills. Students will also have to participate in internships to gain exposure to machinery and robotics.

Several employers suggested that past graduates should come back to mentor current students on what to expect in the engineering field and to provide insight for what workplace skills they will need. Also, as the field of engineering is changing and growing, students will need exposure to environmental permits and sustainable practices.

Additional Comments

Overall, employers strongly emphasized the need for students to participate in internships before graduating. Internships will provide exposure to engineering equipment, along with allowing students exposure to a professional work setting.
Group 2 – College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences – Non-school

Skills and Talents

This group of employers came from a wide range of organizations that included the hospital industry, private sector, and sports industry. Many of these employers agreed that the majority of graduates do not have strong communication skills (both written and verbal). They stated that this was definitely a skill that they looked for when hiring and many graduates lack this skill, along with interview skills. Employers worry that too much focus has been placed on new methods of communication (social media, texting, etc.) and this has limited graduates conversational skills.

Other skills and talents that they look for are: critical thinking skills, the ability to work with others, business communication skills, presentation skills, a strong work ethic, accountability, and previous work experience. They also are looking for employees that have good telephone etiquette and are able to work with upper level management.

Employers stressed the importance of internships to teach students how to be good decision makers, to gain relevant work experience and to work on their communication skills. Many employers said that they use internships to determine whom they will hire permanently (once the internship has ended).

Employers said that most U of M students have developed strong technical skills but need to improve their problem-solving skills. One employer suggested that classes offer better case studies for students to analyze and work through.

Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility

Overall, employers felt that graduates who had participated in an internship had a stronger work ethic than those who had not done an internship. Employers felt that many of their new hires or recent graduates
were not dedicated to working longer hours if needed or to stay past the end of the work day to complete a project or meet a deadline. They also said that most graduates are more concerned with finding a work/life balance than with putting in the hours needed at their workplace.

In the area of leadership skills, employers said that U of M graduates had strong leadership skills compared to those from other universities. They also felt that U of M graduates were willing to be adaptable and flexible in new situations, but they do not always know the best way to handle change. U of M graduates do have the ability to work with others.

*Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis*

For the most part, U of M programs are current with organizational and industry-wide needs. But, the sports industry employers would like to see the U of M offer more sales and marketing classes. Most graduates do not know how to conduct face-to-face sales. They need sales experience to be successful in the sports industry. Human resource employers stated that students need more corporate and consulting experience. To work in the human resources field, graduates will need a strong skill set that includes instructional design experience, along with human resources experience.

*Future Skills and Knowledge*

Future graduates will need statistical analysis skills, people skills, information technology skills, and technical skills. Graduates will need strong computer skills that include web design, programming, and video editing. They must be willing to learn these new skills while not losing focus on strong personal communication skills. They also must be able to multi-task and be able to work on several projects at once.

*Additional Comments*

Employers could not stress enough the importance of internships. They said internships are required for those who want to be hired by their companies. They also said that the U of M should continue to strive to improve their level of academic programs.
Group 3 – College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences

Skills and Talents

Employers in this group were from the education field. They said that they are looking for employees that know teaching strategies and have strong content knowledge. They also noted that graduates need to be able to analyze data, make assessments and provide interventions based on data. In addition, graduates need to be team players and be able to engage with other teachers. Employers want employees who are timely, professional and have good rapport with parents. Also, graduates need to know how to work with varied instructional strategies and be able to incorporate differentiated instruction into the classroom.

Within the College of Education at the U of M, employers emphasized the importance of the Ready to Teach program. They said this was an extremely important tool for students and that those who had been through this program were better-qualified candidates than those who had not been a part of this program.

Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility

Employers again emphasized the great qualities of students who had participated in the Ready to Teach program. They said that these students had a very strong work ethic and even were willing to come in and work on days when they were not required to be at the school. These students volunteer above and beyond their required commitment. Also, employers stated the U of M personnel responsible for the Ready to Teach program were easy to get in touch with and worked quickly to resolve any problems.

For those students who were not a part of the Ready to Teach program, employers stated that these graduates did not have strong classroom management skills. Employers also said that it was hard to know whom to contact on the U of M campus in regards to problems they had with these candidates.
Employers stated that U of M graduates had developed good leadership skills and welcomed leadership roles within their schools. Employers also said that graduates are adaptable and flexible in new situations and were willing to put in the extra time to be successful in the classroom. They also have the ability to work with others.

Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis

Employers agreed that the dual certification program at the U of M is important and needs to be continued. Also, licensure is critical for graduates along with certification (K-6 certification is preferred).

Future Skills and Knowledge

Employers said that future graduates should know common core standards and assessments (TCAP, Smarter Balanced, PARCC). They also will need to be familiar with both formative and summative assessments. Future graduates will need to have a strong work ethic, be a motivator, and be able to take initiative within their classrooms.

Additional Comments

Recent graduates have improved in the areas of interviewing and professionalism. Also, the Ready to Teach program is a wonderful tool for students and needs to be implemented for all students at the U of M. Finally, the U of M does a good job in placing students in all surrounding schools systems, not just within Memphis City Schools or Shelby County Schools. They consider this a major improvement to the program.
Group 4 – College of Communication and Fine Arts

Skills and Talents

Employers from this group included those in the field of architecture, arts and theatre and communications. Many of these employers are looking for students with adaptability, flexibility and reliability. They also are looking for students with ambition, initiative, passion, and imagination. Also, students need to have strong communication skills and the ability to work with others.

One employer stated that in his field, he needs students who are willing to work entry-level jobs. Another employer said they prefer to hire students who have obtained a graduate degree.

In the areas of communication skills, problem-solving skills and technical skills, employers agreed that the development of these skills depended on the individual. They said that some students have developed strong skills while some had not. Again, they stressed this was hard to generalize to all U of M graduates and really was dependent on the individual student. Most employers agreed that students need to have a better knowledge of appropriate business communication skills. One employer stated, “Texting is not business appropriate.” Graduates need to know what style of communication to use with clients. Students also need good presentation skills and need to be able to present concepts and implementation of these concepts to clients.

Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility

In the area of work ethic, employers emphasized the need for students to be prompt, be prepared, and to be appropriately dressed. In regards to promptness, one employer stated, “If you are not five minutes early, you are ten minutes late.” Employers said that students have a consistent problem with promptness. In regards to appearance, employers believe that students should be appropriately dressed for their profession. This may mean covering tattoos and removing piercings to appear professional.
Another area that needs improvement is conflict resolution. Employers stated that most new graduates do not know how to resolve conflict in the workplace or how to negotiate a compromise.

Employers suggested that students take a business fundamentals class before graduation. They also recommended setting up a formal mentoring program in addition to internships. Many employers said they are willing to be involved in a mentoring capacity to students and would be available to speak to classes and to offer visits to their businesses. They also said that internships should be offered earlier to students (not just during their senior year).

Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis

According to some employers, there is a gap between what is being taught and what knowledge is needed for the professional world. The U of M does well teaching entertainers and musicians, but they still need to add a graduate music program. In the area of theatre technical training, the U of M program is current with industry-wide needs. In the area of video and media, equipment changes quite frequently making it difficult for the university to keep up with the latest technology and equipment.

Future Skills and Knowledge

In the future, graduates will need to be able to interact with clients and have strong business skills. They will need to be willing to perform any task they are assigned.

Additional Comments

Employers again stressed the importance of internships and for students to have cross training in a multitude of skill areas.
Group 5 – Loewenberg School of Nursing

Skills and Talents

Many of the participants in this group worked in a hospital setting. Some of the skills and talents that they are looking for in prospective professional employees are: strong communication skills, critical thinking skills, and excellent personal skills. Employers also would like employees to have a professional appearance, especially when interviewing. In addition, employers are looking for graduates who are ready to commit to the profession and to the hospital. Many employers stated that they spend time training new employees only to have them leave or transfer to another department. Graduates also need to have an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to the previously mentioned attributes, graduates need to be goal-oriented and have a career plan. Employers would prefer for new hires to be able to work independently and to have had experience in the healthcare industry, preferably through an internship. Graduates need to be able to be a leader and to display confidence. Also, they need to work well with others and be able to interact with patients and families in a positive manner.

Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility

Employers said that U of M graduates enter the workplace prepared, professional, confident and aware of industry trends. They also stated that U of M graduates are more prepared for meaningful work and are above average compared to graduates from other colleges. A majority of new hires already know their specialty and this is a huge plus to the hospitals.

Compared to graduates from other colleges, U of M students have strong leadership skills and have a higher maturity level. Many employers attributed this to their leadership rotation and group projects, along with labs and simulations. For the most part, graduates are flexible in new situations and have the ability to get along with others.
As a weakness, employers again mentioned the need for a professional appearance when interviewing. Many employers recommended that students take a class on interviewing before graduation. Also, many new graduates will turn down a position if it does not include desirable shifts (example: day shifts vs. night shifts). Recent graduates do not want to work nights, weekends, or holidays and are sometimes uncompromising in the area of scheduling. New hires need more of a commitment to the position and to understand the need to work flexible schedules.

**Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis**

In regards to programs being current with organizational and industry-wide needs, employers said that graduates need more clinical skills (for example, how to start an IV). They also mentioned that students need a greater knowledge of the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Health Plans Survey (HCAHPS) and core measures, along with a stronger foundational knowledge of healthcare policies. Current graduates will need to have a basic knowledge of business skills, along with nursing skills.

**Future Skills and Knowledge**

In the future, graduates will need to be able to work independently and be responsible for all aspects of their job, particularly their scope of practice. They also must know how to document, to delegate, and to work on a team. New hires need to be able to work with support staff in a professional manner. In addition to working with support staff, they will need to be able to communicate with the families of their patients. It is important to know how to offer patient-centered care that works with the families. Also, many companies now have four generations of nurses who have to bridge age gaps and learn to work together to communicate effectively.

**Additional Comments**

Employers again stressed the importance of knowing how to offer patient-centered care that works with the families. In regards to the University of Memphis, employers said that while the school has grown in
quality the last few years, graduates do not receive their authorization to test as quickly as graduates from other schools. They would like to see this changed in the future.

*Group 6 – College of Arts and Sciences*

*Skills and Talents*

Participants in this focus group were from the field of research and anthropology. In this focus group, the most important skills and talents that employers are looking for include writing skills, communication skills, and technology skills. In the area of writing skills, employees need to know how to write and how to prepare proposals. As far as communication, employers are looking for employees who are professional, punctual, and able to run a meeting, and work with diverse clients in various cultures. In addition, employees must also be computer competent and be willing to learn new technology skills.

Almost all of the employers felt that students were lacking skills in technical writing. They felt that students should take a technical writing course before graduation. Employers said that many new graduates are unable to write a report and need more practice doing this. They think this can be accomplished by exposure to more report writing and hands-on projects, including group projects. Classes should have a greater focus on practical and applied assignments, rather than theory. Employers would also like to see students have more experience and contact with on-campus research centers.

*Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility*

Employers felt that U of M graduates had developed a good work ethic and a strong desire to work. One employer stated that U of M graduates had a better work ethic than those from Rhodes. Employers had worked with dedicated interns who were motivated, but they would like to see internships expanded to two semesters, instead of one. By extending the internship, employers felt that students could get a better feel for the company.
In the area of leadership, many employers felt this was based on the individual and that it was a natural ability, not something to be taught. But, they did think a seminar to help students better understand their strengths would be helpful. In the area of flexibility, employers again felt that this was based on the individual. Most graduates have been able to work with others and get along with co-workers, but some have not been prepared to work with various types of people and settings in the business community.

Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis

Employers felt that U of M students should be required to take a multi-methods research course that focuses on both qualitative and quantitative research. One employer stated that the anthropology program is not current and needs to be updated. The program needs to have more collaboration and cross training between departments, to offer a wider variety of courses. Another employer commented that there is a lack of new graduates from the archeology program, limiting whom they are able to hire.

Future Skills and Knowledge

In the future, graduates will need to have strong technology skills, technical writing skills and problem solving skills. They also will need to be able to be flexible and to have hands-on experience in a work setting, along with the ability to multi-task. Graduates will also need to display professionalism, including timeliness and attendance.

Additional Comments

Employers would like to see students participate in practicums, along with internships. They feel that by taking part in practicums, students will have more exposure to various workplace settings and will be able to know what areas they like.
Group 7 – Fogelman College of Business and Economics

Skills and Talents

Participants in this focus group included employers from commercial real estate, finance, accounting, and manufacturing. The most important skills and talents that employers are looking for in prospective employees include: updated technological skills, the ability to multi-task and prioritize, the ability to work on a team, and strong communication skills (both verbal and written). One employer suggested that students should take a technology class as seniors, to be current on the latest technology. Employers also stressed the importance of professionalism and office etiquette within the workplace (professional dress, being punctual, etc.). Employers also would like to see prospective employees have more professional resumes.

Overall employers felt that recent graduates have a general knowledge of technical skills, but need better problem-solving skills and analytical skills. Several employers commented that students are not able to work independently and need constant direction on projects.

Development of Work Ethic, Leadership, and Flexibility

In the area of work ethic, most employers felt that there was a generational gap related to expectations between recent graduates and current employers. Many employers felt that recent hires do not prioritize being on time for work and being dressed appropriately. They also felt that once the employer has set expectations students need to recognize what is expected of them in the workplace. Most recent graduates do not realize that they will be responsible, at times, for menial tasks and entry-level work. They need to be willing to perform any job task that is assigned to them. But, most recent hires from the U of M are willing to work long days. One employer felt that the urban setting of the U of M had prepared graduates better than other colleges. She stated that U of M students are used to attending class, working a part-time job, and being involved with student activities, which helped them be prepared for long workdays.
In relation to leadership skills, the majority of employers said that U of M students who had participated in the MILE program (Memphis Institute for Leadership Education) were a step above those from other universities. Many employers applauded the work of the MILE program, but felt that this should be mandatory for students, not voluntary. All employers agreed that U of M students are adaptable and flexible in new situations and are able to work with others.

Relevance of Current Programs at the University of Memphis

Overall, employers believe that the U of M should offer more direction for students within their specific majors. Many students graduate without knowing specifically what they want to do or lack the focused training they need within their major. Employers again stressed the importance of having students exposed to local companies. They felt this would help to bridge the gap between textbook learning and the actual workplace.

Future Skills and Knowledge

In the future, graduates will need to have strong interpersonal communication skills. They will need to know how to conduct themselves in a meeting and at a business lunch. New hires will also need to know how to interact with co-workers. This includes being able to talk to coworkers face-to-face and not just through email. Future graduates will also be required to know the appropriate use of social media within the workplace.

Additional Comments

Employers remarked that U of M students need to have established professional profiles on LinkedIn (a professional social network) before interviewing and applying for jobs. Several employers recommended establishing these profiles during their junior or senior year of college. Also, employers felt that the U of M needs to establish career centers specific to each college to help place students in the workforce. And, employers would like to see more job fairs take place on campus.
Additionally, the Fogelman College and its professors need to take advantage of opportunities to have local employers meet with their students. This could include having employers come and speak to classes or to have students spend a day at their office participating in job shadowing.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made with the intent of building upon the current success of the University of Memphis. Please note that many of these recommendations are similar to those from the previous study conducted in 2008 emphasizing employers’ desires to see these established within the colleges or to see the U of M continue to build upon these efforts.

- Employers emphasized the need for students to participate in internships before graduation. Many employers would like to see internships expanded to 2 years, not just 1 year. Employers suggest that students begin internships during their junior year of college. Individual colleges should work to establish internships and practicums with local employers whenever possible to help connect students with these opportunities.

- Work with career services and college advisors to establish a seminar on business etiquette that is required for all graduating seniors. Include in this class; how to dress professionally, how to interview, resume writing, the importance of timeliness, and proper use of social media.

- Many employers noted that U of M students lack good verbal and written communication skills. Faculty should be encouraged to require more written assignments and provide students with feedback in order to improve written skills. In the area of verbal skills, employers
were concerned that students place too much emphasis on email and not on face-to-face conversations. Employers suggested that students work in team settings to encourage communication, while also establishing working relationships.

- Employers also stressed the importance of strong presentation skills. As applicable, include presentation opportunities that are specific to the student’s field. Students should have more presentation opportunities and assignments during the junior and senior terms.

- Many of the group participants were interested in working with the University to help strengthen its programs. Employers are willing to mentor students, to speak to classes and to offer job shadowing. Faculty, administrators, and other staff should work with these employers to strengthen internship programs, create volunteer opportunities, and maintain relationships with organizations that could lead to short or long-term employment for current and future graduates.
Appendix
Focus Group Questions

1. What are the most important skills and talents that employers look for in prospective professional employees?
2. Have U of M graduates developed strong communication skills, problem-solving skills and technical skills?
3. Do U of M graduates exhibit a good work ethic and can you specify areas that need improvement?
4. How are the leadership skills of U of M graduates in comparison to other colleges and university graduates you hire?
5. Are they adaptable and flexible in new situations?
6. Do they have the ability to work with others?
7. To what degree are the programs current with organizational and industry-wide needs?
8. What skills and knowledge will future graduates need?
9. Any additional comments?
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<th>Group 7</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reynolds, Bone &amp; Griesbeck PLC</td>
<td>Chief Operating Officer</td>
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<td>CBIZ MHM</td>
<td>Director of Human Resources</td>
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<td>Cummins Inc.</td>
<td>Human Resources Lead</td>
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<td>Terminix</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
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<td>CB Richard Ellis</td>
<td>Human Resources Manager</td>
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<td>First Tennessee</td>
<td>Human Resources Manager</td>
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<td>Fischer &amp; Company</td>
<td>Senior Vice President</td>
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