Life/Career Abilities Framework:
Begin with the End in Mind

Abstract

Soft skills is the learning domain that contributes significantly to student career readiness and leads to future job success. Teachers do help students develop many of these positive behaviors, but schools frequently lack an intentional and system-wide approach that benefits all students. To develop these abilities, schools should follow the "begin with the end in mind" approach by using a list of life/career behaviors that can be observed.

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Introduction

Soft skills is the learning domain that contributes significantly to career readiness and leads to future job success. This paper defines this domain of learning in what Successful Practices Network (SPN) calls *life/career abilities*.

Efforts to teach soft skills can lead to frustration and disappointment, not because they can't be developed, but because objectives are vague or traditional teaching approaches are not effective. The three key strategies for developing soft skills are: 1) Begin with the End in Mind, 2) Measure What Matters, and 3) Nurture Growth. This paper focuses on strategy #1, begin with the end in mind, to help schools develop a common language for fostering life/career abilities[1].

Most teachers agree on certain abilities that contribute to a more positive learning environment, such as: respect for others, particularly those of different backgrounds and cultures; perseverance to complete challenging work and not give up at the first failed attempt; dedication to service or helping others in need. These are some examples of positive behaviors teachers expect students to exhibit. These behaviors will also assist students to be successful in future education and work. Too often the public perceives graduates as having "book smarts" but lacking the 21st century skills and behaviors to be successful in a rapidly changing highly competitive world.

Teachers do help students develop many of these positive behaviors, but schools frequently lack an intentional and system-wide approach that benefits all students. As a result, some schools endure disruptive student behavior, which they attempt to address with discipline policies. Having an instructional approach that every teacher can contribute to, and one that every student can benefit from, requires starting with a clear definition of the behavior goals. Once goals are defined, teachers can work backward to examine and adjust practices to improve results.

> **Challenge:**
> How can schools define the domain of life/career learning (non-cognitive, soft, social/emotional skills) in a way that facilitates their development through intentionally teaching them and providing feedback to students?

To develop these abilities, schools should follow the "begin with the end in mind" approach by using a list of life/career behaviors that can be observed, as distinguished from less observable mindsets and values. It is on behaviors that teachers can most easily give students feedback.

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[1] Further information on measuring and developing these behaviors and mindsets can be found in the SPN white papers, *Data Practices for Developing Life/Career Abilities* and *Life/Career Abilities: Nurturing Growth.*

The school expectation about teaching students what they should be like is not new. Robert Fulghum captured this in his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,* written 30 years ago. What is different today is a rising tide of research proclaiming how important these traits and behaviors are to future college, career, and life success. Success is less about how much you know than about who you are, as demonstrated by mindsets and behaviors. Schools must, of course, continue teaching students how to learn and helping students acquire a strong foundation of knowledge in many subjects. The solution is to find a balance of these three expectations.

The first step in embracing these life/career abilities is to precisely define these traits and then build a system-wide process to weave them with intention into instruction. SPN is committed to *life/career abilities* as a positive and comprehensive term that is preferable to *non-cognitive skills* or *soft skills.* This paper provides definitions and a comprehensive framework for clearly defining a school's life/career abilities curriculum of positive traits and behaviors.

Life/Career Abilities Framework Definitions

Life/career abilities is the umbrella term to include student character traits, mindsets, and behaviors. Within the Life/Career Abilities Framework are three components to clarify for educators how to intentionally and systematically address this domain of learning: Life/Career Guiding Principles, Life/Career Learning Mindsets, and Life/Career Competencies. While related, each one should be addressed differently in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Table 1 presents some of the differences among these components.

Life/Career Guiding Principles – fundamental, enduring, and deeply held values, common to adults in society, that influence actions and behaviors. Schools reinforce these principles through character education initiatives, affirmation, and connections to behavior.

Life/Career Learning Mindsets – beliefs held by students that define how they view themselves, relate to others, and engage in learning. Mindsets are developed as a result of previous experiences and create very personalized reactions to new experiences. Schools influence mindsets by helping students to identify their mindsets, introduce alternative mindsets, and encourage students to reflect on them.

Life/Career Competencies – a set of observable student behaviors that influence the effective application of knowledge and performance of skills. Schools contribute to the development of these behaviors through relationships, expectations, learning experiences, modeling, and feedback.

Table 1. Distinguishing the Components of the Life/Career Abilities Framework

	Components		
	Guiding Principles	**Learning Mindsets**	**Competencies**
Synonyms	Character, values.	Relevance, grit, growth commitment, balance.	Behaviors for college, career, and life readiness (social-emotional skills, employability skills).
Curriculum (what is to be learned)	Agree on common principles shared among all staff and students.	Agree on positive mindsets that influence behavior.	Set individual learning expectations.
Instruction (how developed)	Teach about shared values in school community.	Have students reflect on personal mindsets and staff reflects on school culture that supports positive mindsets.	Provide some specific content. Demonstrate behaviors. Provide opportunities to exhibit those behaviors.
Assessment	Give feedback.	Give feedback.	Give feedback on student work. Use rubrics to measure growth over time. Hold recognition programs.
Grades	Not graded.	Not graded.	Separate ratings over time through rubrics.
Accountability	Staff reflection.	Staff reflection.	Have data measures for students and school.

Life/Career Abilities Framework Components

The following lists can be used as a starting point for conversations among school staff to determine their objectives for life/career abilities instruction. The lists include items from leading research papers and relevant standards.

Life/Career Guiding Principles

Following are examples of guiding principles that schools could use to build character education initiatives and share as values in the school community.

- **Citizenship** - Doing your share to make your community better by being involved in community affairs, becoming informed, voting, and obeying laws and rules.
- **Compassion** - Showing understanding of others by treating them with kindness, care, generosity, and a forgiving spirit.
- **Courage** - Doing the right thing in the face of difficulty and following your conscience instead of the crowd.
- **Empathy** - Being sensitive toward others' feelings and thoughts, understanding what someone else is going through.
- **Honesty** - Telling the truth, admitting wrongdoing, being trustworthy, and acting with integrity.
- **Loyalty** - Demonstrating commitment to friends, family, and institutions, even in difficult times.
- **Respect** - Showing high regard for authority and other people; valuing others by treating them how you would like to be treated.
- **Service** - Sacrificing your desires, time, or energy to benefit others.

Life/Career Learning Mindsets

Following are examples of positive learning mindsets. Schools should encourage students to reflect on them and ensure that the school culture reinforces them.

- **Balance**: "I will develop myself mentally, emotionally, and physically."
- **Belonging**: "I am comfortable as a member of this learning community."
- **Commitment**: "I will apply my talents and skills to achieve the best result."
- **Efficacy**: "I can succeed."
- **Growth**: "I can improve my abilities through effort."
- **Hope**: "I choose to be optimistic about future events."
- **Relevance**: "This work has value and purpose for me."

Life/Career Competencies

Following are behaviors for students to be career, college, and life ready.

1. **Big Picture Awareness** - *Make Meaning!* Has a sense of the larger community, conceptualizes ideas, has vision, sees symphony in events and actions
2. **Career Smarts** - *Focus on the Future!* Networks and connects with others for resources/assistance/support, sets plans based on interests, prepares resume, analyzes job requirements, interviews for jobs, recognizes entrepreneurial opportunities
3. **Collaboration** - *Team and Trust!* Practices teamwork, supports others, learns from others, assumes/fulfills role responsibility, negotiates to resolve conflicts
4. **Communication** - *Talk It Over!* Speaks well in various settings, listens actively, engages in group discussion, forms clear questions, uses digital media
5. **Creativity** - *Think Differently!* Is innovative, imaginative, adaptable, and inventive; is original and contributes new ideas; uses idea creation techniques; refines ideas to improve
6. **Engagement** - *Get Involved!* Participates in extracurricular activities, volunteers, is emotionally committed to activities, responds well to intellectual challenges
7. **Information Skills** - *Google It!* Uses technology to research information, analyzes and evaluates information, produces ideas in digital form, follows legal and ethical standards
8. **Leadership** - *Step Forward!* Takes action, influences others, invites participation, plans ahead, is inspired by success in others, is confident
9. **Observation** - *Pay Attention!* Remembers instructions, demonstrations, and procedures; observes critically; evaluates information for accuracy, bias, and usefulness
10. **Perseverance** - *Don't Give Up!* Is persistent in the face of setbacks, makes repeated effort as a path to mastery, is disciplined, tackles challenges, learns from mistakes
11. **Problem Solving** - *Figure It Out!* Solves problems using math, analyzes critical information, considers options, is logical, makes connections, explains rationale
12. **Productivity** - *Do a Good Job!* Is punctual; uses tools appropriately; plans and organizes tasks; is efficient, orderly, and accurate; practices safety; dresses appropriately for task
13. **Self-control** -*Take Care of Yourself!* Is self-aware, identifies emotional states, makes healthy choices, avoids unsafe risks, controls emotions, acts responsibly
14. **Self-direction** *You Matter!* Sets and strives for goals, connects learning to plans, maintains health, is willing to take risks, knows interests and strengths, manages finances
15. **Self-reflection** *Think About It!* Seeks to improve, adapts to change, is aware of own thinking, is intellectually humble, sees consequences of actions, invites feedback, reflects critically on experiences, copes with setbacks and criticism
16. **Social Facility** *Meet and Greet!* Is socially aware, respects individual differences, builds relationships, uses interpersonal communication, shows empathy, is assertive
17. **Task Responsibility** - *Own it!* Attends class, works independently, completes assignments, organizes materials, follows procedures, manages time, takes responsibility for actions

APPENDIX

Cross-Reference of Life/Career Competencies to Other Resources

This chart cross-references the Life/Career Competencies to similar resources that helped define important behaviors included.

Competency	Dept of Ed. Employability Skills Framework	Career Ready Practices	ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors	Social Emotional Learning	NonCognitive U. of Chicago	Partnership for 21st Century Learning	Deeper Learning	NY Carreer Dev & Occ. Studies
Big Picture Awareness		X				X		X
Career Smarts		X						X
Collaboration	X	X	X			X	X	X
Communication	X	X	X			X	X	X
Creativity	X	X	X			X		X
Engagement		X	X			X		
Information Skills	X	X	X			X		X
Leadership	X	X	X			X		
Observation	X							X
Perseverance		X	X		X	X	X	
Problem Solving	X	X	X			X	X	X
Productivity	X	X	partial			X	partial	X
Self-control	X	partial	X	X				partial
Self-direction		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Self-reflection	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Social Facility	X		X	X	X	X		X
Task Responsibility			X		X	X		

Resources

Following are the most significant documents that helped define the Life/Career Abilities Framework.

U.S. Department of Education Employability Skills Framework

The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education developed the Employability Skills Framework. It was guided by several career and technical education (CTE), adult education, workforce development, and business organizations. The framework is composed of nine key skills organized into three broad categories: Applied Knowledge, Effective Relationships, and Workplace Skills. It includes a cross-reference to other major frameworks and research. The framework is an update of SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills), which has driven widespread work on CTE employability profiles across the nation.

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

The Life/Careers Ability Framework includes self-advocacy and working to set and achieve personal goals. Further, it describes behaviors in observation, perseverance, task responsibility, engagement, big picture awareness, and career smarts for personal planning. These skills are not specifically included in the Employability Skills Framework

Deletions

The Life/Career Abilities Framework does not include applied academics, which SPN does not consider separate behaviors but an extension of acquiring academic skills. Also eliminated is responding to customer needs, which is more of a technical skill.

Career Ready Practices (Career Clusters)

The Career Ready Practices component of the Common Career Technical Core was developed under the leadership of the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (now called Advance CTE). This project provided structure to the development of pathways in the 16 career clusters and had extensive input from employers in each field. In addition to technical skills in the career area, 12 standards provide a framework for the developmental experiences necessary to becoming career ready in all clusters.

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

The Life/Careers Abilities Framework includes social-emotional skills, as in the competencies of *self-control* and *social facility*. Also included are some typical non-cognitive related behaviors, including *self-reflection*, *task responsibility,* and *observation*. These are not included in the Career Ready Practices.

Deletions

The Career Ready Practices are broad statements of desirable abilities that do not lend themselves directly to specific behaviors and competencies for giving students feedback. Although many of the concepts are included in several of the competencies, not included in the Life/Careers Abilities Framework are Act as a Responsible and Contributing Citizen and Employee and Apply Academic and Technical Skills.

ASCA Student Mindsets & Behaviors

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) *Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College- and Career Readiness for Every Student* was developed in 2014 as an update of a list that was first published in 1997. It describes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development. The standards are based on a survey of research and best practices in student achievement from a wide array of educational standards and efforts. The ASCA mindsets section was an inspiration for the learning mindsets section of the Life/Career Abilities Framework. The 29 ASCA behavior standards are organized into three categories; Learning Strategies, Self-Management, and Social Skills. The Life/Career Abilities Framework draws heavily from the ASCA list of behavior standards, primarily combining several behaviors to create a manageable list.

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

The Life/Careers Abilities Framework includes *observation*, *big picture awareness*, and *career smarts*. The ASCA list does not include those behaviors and only partially covers the behaviors included in *productivity*.

Deletions

The Life/Careers Abilities Framework omitted Demonstrate the Ability to Balance School, Home and Community since it would be difficult to measure in student work. Demonstrate Ability to Delay Immediate Gratification for Long-term Rewards was also omitted for the same reason.

Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Social and emotional learning has become a popular topic in dealing with behaviors that can either positively support or negatively interrupt student achievement. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is probably the nation's leading organization advancing social and emotional learning. CASEL encourages practices through which children and adults (1) acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, (2) feel and show empathy for others, (3) establish and maintain positive relationships, and (4) make responsible decisions. The competencies of self-control, social facility, self-direction, and self-reflection draw heavily on social-emotional practices.

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

The Life/Career Competencies adds 13 important behaviors that go beyond social-emotional learning.

Deletions

All of the concepts from social-emotional learning are included in the Life/Career Competencies.

U Chicago Consortium on School Research Non-cognitive Study

Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Non-cognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review plays a critical role in defining and elevating the importance of focusing on so-called *non-cognitive factors* in student learning. This report examines five broad categories of non-cognitive skills in relation to academic achievement, academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies, and social skills.

How does Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

While the research was very specific in focusing on five categories of non-cognitive skills, the Life/Career Competencies is much broader, with an addition of nearly a dozen behaviors.

Deletions

Learning Mindsets was omitted from the Life/Career Competencies list since it is difficult to measure as a behavior. However, Learning Mindsets was an impetus for creating the separate category of Life/Career Learning Mindsets in the framework. Another topic omitted is Study Skills, since this is a technical skill related to content knowledge than a true behavior.

Partnership for 21st Century Learning

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) framework represents both 21st century student outcomes and support systems. The Framework for 21st Century Learning describes the skills, knowledge, and expertise students must master to succeed in work and life; it is a blend of content knowledge, specific skills, expertise, and literacies. This framework has generated a great deal of interest over the past decade as a way to think more broadly about student readiness beyond typical core academic subjects. The cross-reference to Framework for 21st Century Learning focuses on two categories: Learning and Innovation Skills and Life and Career Skills. Learning and Innovation Skills describes several important behaviors such as creativity and working with others. Life and Career Skills is similar to the Life/Careers Abilities Framework and even has a similar title.

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

The Life/Career Competencies adds the following behaviors that are not mentioned specifically in the P21 framework: *self-control, observation, and career smarts*.

Deletions

None.

Deeper Learning — National Academy, American Institute of Research, Hewlett Foundation

Deeper Learning is a label given to several related initiatives. The Hewlett Foundation has funded some initiatives related to Deeper Learning. There is a network of schools focused on Deeper Learning. The American Institute of Research has conducted research studies and created several reports. The National Academy convened a national panel and produced a report titled *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century.*

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

Several of the behaviors in the Life/Career Competencies list relate to the Deeper Learning Interpersonal Domain and Intrapersonal Domain. However, there are several additional behaviors beyond those mentioned in the Deeper Learning competencies.

Deletions

The Deeper Learning Cognitive Domain is not addressed in the Life/Career Framework.

Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Credential

The New York State Education Department has established a work readiness student credential based on the Career Development and Occupational Studies Standards. To qualify for this credential, students must complete a combination on Career and Technical Education, work-based learning and demonstration of work readiness competencies. A recommended Employability profile is provided for school districts.

How does the Life/Career Abilities Framework differ?

Additions

Several of the behaviors in the Life/Career Competencies list relate to the CDOS Credential. However, there are several additional behaviors beyond those mentioned in the CDOS Employability profile, including engagement, leadership, perseverance and self-direction .

Deletions

None. All of the Performance Expectations of the recommended CDOS Employability profile are included in the Framework.

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