**University of Central Arkansas**

**General Education Assessment Subcommittee**

**Business Leader Focus Group Summary**

**March 28, 2012**

**Note: This summary includes contributions from three executives not able to attend the group discussion.**

**Purpose:** Engage selected leaders in different areas (business, health care, education, law, etc.) in the process of evaluating the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) graduates' abilities to participate and contribute in the work environment. The focus was on the basic skills (as opposed to specialized knowledge) graduates need to succeed in these areas.

**Focus Group Discussion Topics**

**Discuss participant expectations of UCA graduate skills in the following categories:**

**Communication**

1. Participants agreed that Communication is "a real issue." Specifically, students must understand how to communicate professionally both in person and via email. The participants saw a lack of face-to face communication skills and reported that college graduates often lack “basic people skills.” The amount of time they spend using electronic media (e.g. cell phones, texting, Facebook) leaves them unprepared for development in their field, which requires facility in writing and in giving oral presentations. This depends on "traditional" oral and written communication skills.
2. In addition, different forms of nonverbal communication are also a problem for many graduates (e.g. personal appearance at job interviews; efficiently communicating information in resumes). While students should keep up with available technology, they need to understand better how to use it to present facts clearly and effectively. Computing intelligence should be tied to formal communication skills; students should know to "think before you write."

**Collaboration**

Participants agreed that collaboration is very important: graduates will likely be asked to work on teams and/or serve on committees, and “problems with collaboration lead to lost opportunities and ‘burnt bridges.’" Students need to think beyond what they can do as individuals, understand team objectives, and use communication effectively to work toward the team’s goals.

**Critical Thinking**

1. Many participants commented on some students' lack of maturity, which they further defined as a lack of self-awareness or self-assessment. Students appear to be fulfilling expectations of their parents without having thought about their own goals. They lack a sense of direction and, therefore, cannot do the kind of thinking that enables one to make the logical decisions to reach one’s goals. They should learn to avoid being “me” oriented and learn how to contribute to an organization’s mission and goals. Critical Thinking should be a goal in the teaching of skills and development of knowledge in all majors/courses.

Critical thinking skills should include the ability to organize information, e.g. to build a “tree” of information that reflects the relationship between different kinds of data. They need to be able to understand the “core mission” of the organization (whether it’s for-profit or non-profit) and how to use information to contribute to that mission. They should be able to use critical thinking to solve real problems within the context of the organization’s mission.

**Computing Intelligence**

1. Participants agreed that the key to the use of technology is to be able to use computing intelligence as a tool, not as a replacement for communication skills. Technology should be seen as a tool to create a new framework, not as a crutch, and students should avoid responding to questions by “Googling” for the answer. Access to the internet is not a substitute for the kind of thinking that considers and anticipates possible scenarios, the “what ifs” that lead to creative approaches. They should understand that having technology is also no substitute for the hard work that real education entails and should have a sense of what computers can’t do as well as what they can do.

**Identify other skills or knowledge that participants expect graduates to possess.**

1. The ability to use communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and computing intelligence skills in combination to “get the job done.”
2. Strong work ethic.
3. The ability to make adjustments, especially in managing different projects. Students should be willing to take responsibility for mistakes and learn from experience.
4. The ability to offer solutions to problems, not just point out the problem. For this, they need a system for problem solving: "what is the right tool for this problem, and then how do you get that tool?"
5. A sense of self-awareness and a passion for what they are doing. This needs to be brought up very early in the college experience because the University has "the greatest opportunity to mold students."
6. Internships that allow students to see the expectations in a particular field. Requiring internships would be great, if enough opportunities can be found, but it would be better if they came earlier in the students’ university career so they can change course if they find that they aren’t really suited to the field.
7. Efforts by the university to establish a connection between curriculum and application; the use of "Real World Application" and the opportunity to develop “experiential knowledge” in the curriculum.
8. Faculty passion and focus to continue growing in their field.
9. The promotion of involvement in on-campus affairs (Student Government, Campus Leadership, Student Affairs) as an opportunity to develop leadership qualities, networking skills, personal connections: an invaluable experience.
10. The development of realistic expectations and an understanding that a degree is the entry to opportunities, not a ticket to success.
11. The ability to integrate public and private lives and interact with the civic community, both in terms of business and personal relationships. Social skills and involvement with the community enable students to know "what's going on in the business environment."

**What is the individual participant and group evaluation of UCA graduates' preparation for success as employees in central Arkansas?**

1. Participants are very positive about the University and UCA graduates.
2. Interns from UCA possess many of the skills discussed during the focus group.
3. Graduates are well-prepared.
4. Graduation rates are disappointing.
5. Branding of UCA vs. UALR gives UALR an edge.

**Final Comments**

1. The participants do not expect UCA to teach students everything they will need to know. But students should be taught how to learn, adapt, and grow. UCA must provide the impetus for students to keep learning. The goal should be to inspire students with a passion for learning.
2. Participants would like to see students taking more personal initiative to go beyond what is asked of them. Let students know that they can bring new ideas to the table; that they can make mistakes and not be afraid to learn from them.
3. Students need to understand that technology is a tool; it is not what drives things.
4. Participants expressed mixed emotions about the idea of online education. More value is placed on face to face communication in the classroom.
5. One participant stated that they hoped online education does not replace the classroom; when hiring new employees, online degrees "are not considered to be real degrees."
6. We should increase the number/percent of graduates.
7. The university should develop an “entrepreneurial perspective” in graduates, teaching them to understand that “knowledge begets knowledge.”
8. UCA should provide the right “pool of people” for organizations to choose from.

Students should understand the difference between "knowing the rules and their application."

Leadership must be practiced in the classroom.