
From Field to Future: Translating Extracurricular Activities into Transferable Skills for Career Success

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Abstract

This article explores the connection between skill development in extracurricular activities and skills needed for the workplace, highlighting the results from a survey with the Seneca Sting Women's Soccer Team, the 2023 Canadian College Athletic Association National Champions. Using survey results collected from the Seneca soccer team players and other broader research on employability and transferable soft skills needed in the workplace, findings reveal an awareness among the soccer players of the skills gained through participating in sports, such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration and adaptability. These findings suggest the importance of career professionals continuing to support students in developing these skills through targeted skills articulation programming that improves their confidence in communicating skills gained from academic and extracurricular activities for workplace success. This article examines the research question: How do skills gained through extracurricular activities such as varsity soccer translate into skills needed for the workplace?

Keywords: extracurricular activities, transferable skills, career success, skill development, varsity athletics, student athletes, career influencer, skills articulation

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Helping students connect their activities to workplace-relevant skills is essential. This understanding fosters self-efficacy and builds confidence in their ability to succeed in their chosen careers. Moreover, students need to realize that skills are the language employers and industries speak. Bridging the gap between the skills students develop and the skills employers need is vital for transitioning from school to work.

Graduating career-ready students is a primary mission for many post-secondary institutions and career centres. Career readiness involves having a clear understanding of oneself, one's work aspirations, and the ability to navigate changes in one's career. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (n.d.) defines career readiness as the "foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management" (para 1). The competencies identified include Career and Self-Development, Communication, Critical Thinking, Equity and Inclusion, Leadership, Professionalism, Teamwork, and Technology (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2025). It is no longer sufficient to prepare students solely in the subject matter; graduating confident, well-rounded students with academic and technical knowledge, as well as a variety of transferable skills, has become essential to their success in the workplace.

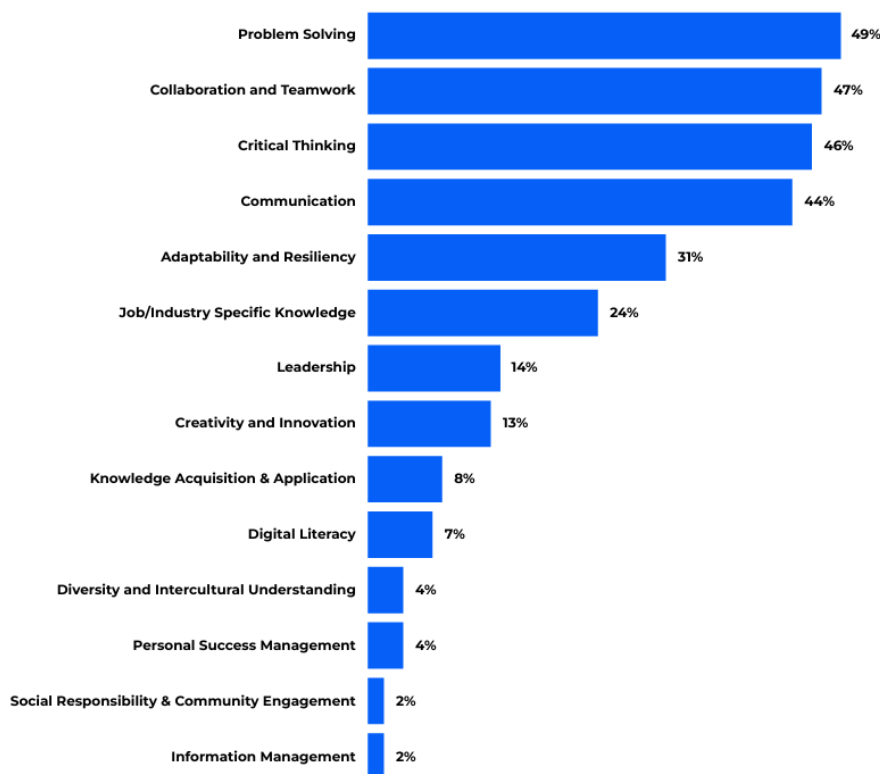
While career development literature emphasizes the importance of developing skills for career and workplace readiness, many post-secondary students continue to struggle with articulating these skills. As career educators, we frequently encounter students who struggle to communicate skills they have acquired through academic programs, experiences, and other extracurricular activities in relation to workplace requirements. Despite recognizing the importance of these skills for career success, many students find it challenging to articulate them confidently. According to Mary Pretotto, a Professor in the School of Marketing & Media at Seneca Polytechnic, "Traditionally, students laser focus on the outcome of what they learn and the grades they receive. By having them consciously consider the 'how and why' of the skills they are developing, the long-term benefits of what they are being taught begins to resonate with them in a more concrete way" (as cited in Seneca Polytechnic, 2023a, para. 11). Acquiring and developing skills is a fundamental pillar of self-awareness and career readiness. The Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC) defines skills as "abilities and aptitudes, or that which a person is good at and which can be learned or developed" (CERIC, n.d.). These skills are needed for all individuals to start and progress in the workforce. Gaining skills and abilities to accomplish career related tasks is a recipe for achieving success in one's career.

A 2024 summary briefing conducted by The Conference Board of Canada looked at the needs for social and emotional skills (SES) in the workplace (Rose, 2024). Findings from employers indicated that those skills (also referred to as soft, human, or people skills) are as important as technical skills, adding that staff with strong SES contribute to a positive workplace culture while also boosting profitability.

Recently, the 2025 Canadian Campus Recruitment Outlook Report by Brainstorm Strategy Group (Brainstorm Strategy Group, 2025), surveyed over 150 employers from November 2024 to February 2025 to gauge the current state of campus recruiting and to forecast hiring trends for 2025 (see Figure 1). Findings indicated that employers ranked the top three skills they seek in new student recruits as problem solving (49%), collaboration and teamwork (47%), and critical thinking (46%).

Figure 1

Top Skills Sought After in New Student Job Candidates



Note. Adapted from 2025 Canadian campus recruitment outlook report by Brainstorm Strategy Group, 2025 <https://brainstorm.ca/product/2025-campus-recruitment-outlook-report>.

they can gain and develop these skills. Dan Lonergan, Manager, Experiential Learning, emphasizes, “We’re in a world filled with countless AI enhanced resumes, cover letters, and LinkedIn pages. Now more than ever, how effectively students articulate their skills can make all the difference. They need to use their lived experiences—whether those are from school, previous jobs or even sports to strengthen their ability to articulate skills” (D. Lonergan, personal communication, February 4, 2026).

Seneca Polytechnic also recognizes the importance of such skills in career success. As part of its 2023-2026 strategic plan entitled *The Next*, it emphasizes its dedication to getting students “career and world ready,” offering a seamless transition from education to employment (Seneca Polytechnic, 2023b). Through consultations with students and employers, Seneca identified the importance of graduating students with strong human skills, many of which are transferable—alongside their technical competencies, so that they could thrive in the workplace and life. Collaboration, communication, empathy, resourcefulness, and agility were among the human skills required in every sector today and critical to building a successful career. Subsequently, Seneca is embedding skill development in curriculum and providing learning opportunities in less formal settings to prepare students for daily work environments. It is in these less formal settings (including extracurricular activities such as varsity athletics) that students can often overlook as a place where

Method

Research Design

This survey used a mixed-methods design to address the research question: How do skills gained through extracurricular activities such as varsity soccer translate into skills needed for the workplace? The relevant skills assessed by this research were communication, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, attitude, and digital skills. The combined quantitative approach contained measures of perceived skill development of each indicator. Qualitative measures supplemented these questions by providing participants with an opportunity to provide reflective accounts of how they recognize, apply, and articulate transferable skills gained through sports.

Participants

Participants were student-athletes from the Seneca Sting Women's Soccer Team, the 2023 Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association National Champions. All participants were full-time post-secondary students in a Canadian post-secondary institution at the time of the survey. Of the 24 eligible participants, 19 agreed to participate. Sixteen completed the survey in full, while three partially completed the survey—completing enough of the survey to be included in the analysis. All responses were included in the findings and summaries. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically prior to online survey access. This survey received ethics clearance from the Seneca Polytechnic Research Ethics Board.

Instrument Development

The researcher-developed survey included 17 questions, spanning quantitative and qualitative formats. Item development was informed by contemporary employability literature and skills categories frequently referenced by career development organizations and employers. The skills categories in the survey include Communication, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Adaptability, Attitude, and Digital Skills. The survey combined the following elements:

- Quantitative items, assessing perceived confidence in the skill, frequency of skill use, and situational application on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*Poorly*) to 5 (*Very Effectively*).
- Qualitative items, including open-ended prompts inviting reflection on where, how, and under what conditions the skills were developed and demonstrated through the activity.

To elicit concrete evidence rather than general labels, the survey emphasized context-specific prompts. For example, instead of asking, "What skills did you develop from your extracurricular activities?" the instrument used items such as, "How well do you communicate with teammates during intense matches?" This approach aimed to increase recall of authentic performance situations is consistent with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), which highlights the role of gained skills and strengthening confidence.

Procedure

The online survey was administered to all eligible athletes via a secure link distributed by email using Qualtrics Survey Platform. The estimated completion time was 10–20 minutes. Participants could complete the survey on a computer or mobile device at a time of their choosing.

Data Analysis

Quantitative responses were summarized using descriptive analyses (e.g., counts and response distributions) and summarized in percentages. Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in how athletes articulated and applied transferable skills. Qualitative data were examined in full, but only responses that substantively contributed to the thematic categories and aligned with the research question were selected for inclusion in the findings (See Table 1).

Table 1

Team Skills Assessment Results

Skill Area	Survey Focus	Question	# of Respondents	Response Summary
Communication	Use of communication skills during team interactions	How effectively do you express your ideas during team discussions?	19	• 63% Very effectively & Effectively • 37% Average
		How well do you communicate with teammates during intense matches?	17	• 88% Very effectively & Effectively • 12% Average
Critical Thinking	Use of critical thinking skills during matches	How well are you able to understand and analyze opponenets' strategies during matches?	17	• 88% Very effectively & Effectively • 12% Average
		How comfortable are you with adjusting tactics mid-game?	17	• 100% Very effectively & Effectively
Collaboration	Use of collaboration skills with teammates	How effectively do you handle disagreements or differeing opinions within the team?	17	• 71% Very effectively & Effectively • 24% Average • 5% Fair
		How skillfully do you build strong working relationships with your teammates?	17	• 95% Very skillfully & Skilled • 5% Fair
Adaptability	Ability to adapt during matches	How open are you to adjusting your playing style based on the needs of the team?	17	• 88% Very open & Open • 12% Neither open nor Resistant
		How effectively do you handle unexpected changes during matches?	17	• 100% Very effectively & Effectively
Attitude	Ability to maintain a positive attitude during matches	How consistently do you maintain a positive mindset during challenging matches or setbacks?	17	• 22% Very consistently • 59% Consistently • 17% Sometimes

Results

Team Skills Assessment Results

Our Seneca skills survey shows a strong alignment between the skills students gain through extracurricular activities and those sought after by employers. Key findings seen in Table 1 include:

- Adaptability: 100% of participants reported handling unexpected changes very effectively and effectively in highly stressful in-game situations.
- Communication: 88% rated their communication as very effective and effective during intense matches.
- Collaboration: 95% answered they very skillfully and skillfully build strong working relationships.

The identification of these skills is an important first step. However, students often need support in recognizing and expressing these skills as they plan their next career steps. By providing tools to help students translate their academic, work, and extracurricular experiences into clearly articulated skills and strengths, we as career educators help foster their confidence and self-sufficiency in their career journeys.

Through some of the qualitative questions, we were able to gain further insight of how participants viewed the skills they have developed. One participant shared:

“As a student in health care, using effective Communication and collaboration is crucial. Using these skills allows me to work together with others creating a better outcome for patients in our field. Communicating when help is needed allows us to prevent injury and improve overall care for patients” (Participant 1).

We also believe that the survey helped students reflect on their experience and recognize how the soccer activity they were involved in helped them develop these skills for their future workplaces. According to another participant, “All of the skills I have learned can be applied to my future career where I can be adaptable in my field, collaborate effectively with other team members and have a positive attitude going into work” (Participant 2).

Discussion

Recognizing the importance of skills highlighted in the various surveys mentioned, as career educators, we want to support and empower students to not only develop these skills but also to gain confidence in utilizing them. It is also important to recognize allies that can help with this endeavour inside and outside the classroom and to seek alliance in augmenting this learning. By providing students with the strategies to help them learn how to use career information, we help them develop career literacy for their career journey. However, despite our efforts, we still encounter many students who find it challenging to translate their classroom learning, paid and unpaid work, volunteering, or extracurricular experiences into industry-relevant skills. Some research studies support this idea and have shown that students report a lack of awareness of the full extent of the skills they have developed, often mentioning only a few when engaging with employers (Jackson, 2013, & Strachan, 2016, as cited in Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019).

Furthermore, recent research studies have pointed to a “skills gap” between employability skills that graduates possess and the requirements of prospective employers (Boden & Nedeva, 2010, as cited in Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019; Jackson & Chapman, 2012, as cited in Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019). However, this may not be a “skills gap” rather an “articulation of skills gap” (Joy et al., 2013, as cited in Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019). This “articulation skills gap” refers to the disconnect between students’ actual employability skills and their ability to effectively communicate these skills to employers. This gap is not about students not having the skills, but rather about their non-ability to articulate those skills effectively with employers. Students might not be giving value to skills they develop from activities and extracurricular

experiences as they might believe they are less important than skills they developed in paid experiences.

This gap between the skills students develop and those they can confidently articulate can also be explained by Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977). It refers to a person's perception of their ability to achieve their goals by performing required tasks. In postulating this, Bandura's theory might explain why students feel they lack skills or believe that they have very few, even though they have developed them. Students might feel they lack expertise in a subject due to solely having theoretical exposure to it; they might think they have not developed practical skills in that area rather only gained academic knowledge. The lack of confidence in these skills might limit students in their career planning and development, as they may reject certain careers due to their limited perception of their potential, therefore restricting them to careers they feel they are capable of doing versus ones they aspire to pursue, according to Gottfredson's theory on Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981). This theory explains how people eliminate and choose careers based on self-concept, social factors and perceived options. Changing this perception is crucial for students to gain confidence in their work and activities inside and outside the classroom. Showing students that they have gained both technical and transferable skills through classroom projects, experiential learning, or extracurricular activities is vital to building their confidence in their abilities.

As career educators, we play an important role in helping students connect the skills they develop from academic learning, experiences, and activities to examples they can articulate in their career journey. Many standardized and non-standardized skills assessments and methods have been developed to help students identify their skills. While these can be helpful for some students, others might still struggle to articulate their skills. For example, even though some students complete a skills checklist or assessment to identify skills they have developed, they still seem to lack confidence in articulating these skills to employers on resumes or in interviews. This disconnect between identified skills and demonstrated experiences is an area where we can help students translate their experiences and fill the gaps.

One way to help close this gap is by incorporating a simple skills reflection activity, enabling students to clearly recognize and acknowledge the skills they have developed both inside and outside the classroom. Linking activities to the skills developed helps students articulate those skills. This three-step reflective process outlined in Figure 2 is as follows:

1. **Select Activity:** List a completed activity or experience. Write down duties, tasks and responsibilities completed (i.e., describe it in detail and consider the steps undertaken to complete the activity or experience).
2. **Identify Skills:** Identify the skills developed while completing each task from the activity or experience. (Note: The practitioner can provide a list of transferable skills).
3. **Accomplishments:** Add the results you achieved or accomplishments you felt proud of from the activity or experience. (Note: The student may apply this reflection to as many activities and experiences as desired.)

Figure 2

Reflection Activity: Identifying Acquired Skills



Research findings by Tomasson Goodwin et al. (2019) further support that the use of a reflection activity helps students better articulate their skills. In their research they discussed findings that indicate students have difficulties articulating their employability skills without targeted teaching interventions. They found that previous exposure to the STAR method format (Situation, Task, Action, and Result) was the only significant factor affecting students' ability to articulate skills. Their recommendation is to integrate employability skills articulation assignments across all years and programs.

This type of reflection enables students to express the skills they have gained by drawing tangible links between their experiences and how those skills were developed. It may also further help to identify areas for enhancement. This can be incorporated into class assignments or projects, co-op and experiential learning, career chats, and other activities, helping students change their perception of skills acquired, thereby gaining confidence in their abilities.

We recognize that allies are needed in this venture as helping students develop career literacy and self-confidence in skills is not solely the task of career educators. Others can also play a crucial role in helping students recognize their valuable skills. Students tend to interact with faculty members and actively seek their opinions and guidance (Sipos, 2024). This concept of Career Influencers (CIs) has emerged within literature, showcasing individuals that play an important role in a student's career development. CIs are defined as individuals working in postsecondary institutions who informally provide career-related advice, guidance, and/or counselling to prospective and current students and/or alumni (Ho, 2017, as cited in Sipos, 2024). It is important to harness the CI role in the development of students' self-concept and confidence in building skills. An alliance between career educators and CIs could significantly enhance students' self-efficacy and career development. Developing relationships among CIs—such as professors, academic advisors, student club leaders, sport coaches, and peer mentors, to name a few—and positioning them as allies, will enhance the learning gained inside and outside the classroom in relation to developing career literacy. Sharing career knowledge and information to equip CIs with career language and tools will also ensure that the messaging is compounded and impactful.

Conclusion

In examining the research question, “How do skills gained through extracurricular activities such as varsity soccer translate into skills needed for the workplace?” this article shows how the Seneca Sting Women's Soccer Team developed an awareness of skills gained through participating in sports. The survey results collected from the varsity team survey and other broader research on employability and transferable soft skills needed in the workplace shows an alignment between the skills students gain through extracurricular activities including communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability and those sought after by employers. This alignment might not be initially evident to students however through the support of career professionals, these skills can be identified and further articulated. Building on research by Tomasson Goodwin et al. (2019), the implementation of reflective and targeted skills articulation programming can assist in improving students' confidence in communicating and articulating skills. By providing tools to help students translate their academic, work, and extracurricular experiences into clearly articulated skills and strengths, we support the development of their self-confidence and self-sufficiency in their career journeys.

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