

Helping Family Science Students Make Themselves More Marketable: Identifying and Developing the Skills Employers Want

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Many graduating family science students experience anxiety; they wonder about their capabilities and about their eligibility to apply for various types of jobs. One way educators can boost student confidence is to help them appreciate the skills and knowledge that they are building. Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) faculty need to articulate learning outcomes students will accomplish across the entire HDFS curricula. Students need to identify and document, perhaps by assembling a portfolio, which skills and discipline-based knowledge they have acquired. To maximize their marketability, it is particularly important for them to highlight qualities that employers value, as well as their family science expertise.

What do employers look for in prospective job candidates?

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the top 12 skills or qualities that employers want in their employees, regardless of discipline, are: communication skills (speaking and

writing), honesty/integrity, teamwork skills, a strong work ethic, analytical skills, flexibility/adaptability, interpersonal skills, motivation/initiative, computer skills, detail orientation, organizational skills, and leadership ability.

Because many of these skills are needed in a variety of professions, they are “transferable.” Since many of these qualities are interpersonal in nature, they are likely developed throughout an HDFS curriculum. Students can provide evidence of other desired traits through their class and co-curricular experiences.

In addition to transferable skills, what unique attributes do HDFS graduates have to offer?

Human Development and Family Science programs offer a unique discipline-based education which equips graduates for a

variety of rewarding careers. Students of HDFS have an exceptional understanding of a family’s impact on individual development, as well as larger social issues. In addition, programs approved by NCFR for

the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) designation require knowledge explicitly specified across ten content areas, including: families in society, internal family dynamics, lifespan development, human sexuality, interpersonal relationships, family resource management, parenting, family policy, ethics, and family life education methodology.

Since some employers maybe unfamiliar with family science, students should familiarize themselves with the organization’s mission as well as the job description and be ready to describe how their skills can benefit a given organization.

What can family science students do to make themselves more marketable?

When applying and interviewing for a job, HDFS students should highlight the transferable skills they have gained and the unique knowledge they can bring to a job. The most important skills that employers seek are speaking and writing abilities. Many HDFS programs require an interpersonal relationships course, in which students practice “I” statements, reframing, active/reflective listening, and resolving conflicts. In addition, students often learn basic helping/counseling skills, empathy skills, perception-checking, and the importance of being aware of conflict styles and non-verbal communication. Students should also capitalize on opportunities to enhance their writing skills throughout their college/university career. Although it is easy to disregard the feedback on writing assignments and focus on the grade, students

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- Combine tasks when possible—spend quality time with family while driving, grocery shopping, etc.
- Focus on communication with your spouse or partner—talk about each other’s day, concerns, plans and hopes. Take a walk together which serves as quality time and a stress reliever.
- Purchase services if possible, such as housekeeping.
- Enjoy the moment—when not doing university work, don’t think about it.

While there is no way to avoid all stressors in balancing work/family and academia, we hope these tips help smooth the way for others. Enjoy the journey and good luck!

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should seriously review their instructors' written critiques and address recurring issues. Students can improve these skills by writing multiple drafts, asking peers for critique, and by using the campus writing center and related resources. The ability to work as a team member, which requires flexibility/adaptability and strong interpersonal skills in order to negotiate roles, work assignments, and responsibilities, is also important to employers. Students should consider participation in group presentations, research or writing projects as opportunities to hone their collaborative abilities. Each group project requires students to assess and reflect on these experiences and to identify strengths and areas for growth. For example, some students may discover that they excel in leading, organizing, or encouraging members to stay on task. Other students may note that they are attentive to details, able to motivate others, or successful in handling group tensions. Whatever their strengths, students should be sure to mention these qualities in interviews and cover letters.

Employers are interested in a strong work ethic, honesty and integrity. These characteristics, which need to be genuine, can also be displayed and documented. For instance, students should be certain to know and follow their institutional academic integrity policies and the ethical principles and guidelines for family scientists. Students should also take pride in work that is original and properly documented and for high-quality work done completely and on schedule.

Computer skills are also important to underscore on resumes or in job interviews. Through class assignments, internships, and professional development, students can enhance skills in using Word, spreadsheets, Publisher, electronic communication, genogram software, SPSS and/or the Internet.

Finally, leadership skills appeal to prospective employers. Active roles in student organizations foster leadership potential, as do related campus jobs such as those in research and teaching. Membership in honor societies and participation in professional meetings also indicate leadership qualities.

Since some employers may be unfamiliar with family science, students should famil-

iarize themselves with the organization's mission as well as the job description and be ready to describe how their skills can benefit a given organization. Students should document any background that might be relevant to the job. For example, given family science's emphasis on lifespan development, graduates can emphasize their in-depth understanding of all age groups—children, adolescents, adults and older adults—and that they are prepared to work with multiple generations. HDFS students might also stress their understanding on marital/couple well-being and its impact on the family and individuals; they are knowledgeable about marriage education and enrichment programs. HDFS students can offer a strong educational background in areas such as human sexuality. This makes them particularly marketable for agencies and programs that offer sexuality education, family planning information, or sexual violence advocacy.

Demonstrated knowledge in family policy helps employers to see how HDFS graduates are able to assess policies and programs from a family perspective, function within the policymaking arena, educate policymakers, and influence family policy. Students who have learned to create family genograms should highlight this ability to document family dynamics. Skills in interviewing, observation and research should also be noted. Students can showcase their original family life education programs which demonstrate skills in designing, implementing, and assessing a program. Finally, experience gleaned from internships, family life education delivery, and relevant volunteer experiences should be emphasized. Graduating HDFS students can offer a unique perspective about individuals and their families and emphasize



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these strengths that they would bring to the workplace.

Conclusion

Self reflection is an important step in preparing for the job search. Faculty advisors and other valued mentors can help the student identify personal and professional strengths. Together they can list personal characteristics, knowledge, skills and experiences that mentors should highlight in letters of reference. Soon-to-be graduates should work with their campus career centers to learn to write engaging cover letters and effective resumes which draw attention to their professional preparedness. With a high-quality family science education, well-honed skills, impressive experiences and self-awareness, HDFS graduates are well equipped to serve individuals and families.

**Those interested in learning how Messiah College's HDFS Department intentionally integrates numerous transferable professional skills into its curriculum should contact the second author or review Berke, D.L., & Hamon, R.R. (2003). A comprehensive approach to program development and assessment: Using a continuous process improvement systems model. Journal of Teaching in Marriage and Family, 3, 291-325.*

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