

Assessing Soft Skills Development among Business Students: Evidence from West Visayas State University

Marie Ann B. Parangan

College of Business and Management, West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines

ORCID: 0009-0006-8776-6413

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Richel J. Gabutin Jacela

West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines

Email: richel.jacela@wvsu.edu.ph

ORCID: 0009-0009-5711-255X

Jixie Mae E. Salinas

College of Business and Management, West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines

Ryan Marc F. Subigca

College of Business and Management, West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines

Jenelle S. Teruel

College of Business and Management, West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines

Abstract

This study assessed the level of soft skills development among business students of West Visayas State University, focusing on five key competencies: communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity. Using a descriptive-correlational quantitative research design, data were collected from 163 third- and fourth-year students during the academic year 2024–2025 through a validated 30-item questionnaire. The study examined variations in soft skills when students were classified according to sex, year level, and course, and also explored the relationships among the identified competencies. Descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation were employed for data analysis at a 0.05 level of significance. Results revealed that students exhibited high proficiency across all five domains, with communication skills obtaining the highest mean score. No significant differences were found when grouped by sex, while differences emerged when classified by year level and course, favoring fourth-year students and those enrolled in Financial Management and Tourism Management programs. Correlation analysis indicated significant positive relationships among all skill dimensions, confirming that improvement in one competency reinforces others. The findings validate the applicability of Human Capital and Competency-Based theories in explaining soft skills development and highlight the importance of sustained curriculum enhancement to prepare graduates for leadership and professional adaptability in dynamic business environments.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Communication, Problem-Solving, Leadership, Decision-Making, Creativity, Business Education, Employability

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly changing business environment, soft skills have become indispensable for professional success and employability. While technical expertise remains essential, employers increasingly prioritize interpersonal competencies such as communication, leadership, creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making. These skills enhance collaboration, adaptability, and innovation—attributes required to thrive in complex and competitive business contexts (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). In response to global economic shifts and evolving organizational structures, higher education institutions are challenged to integrate soft skills into their programs to equip graduates with holistic competencies essential for the 21st-century workforce (Bernardo et al., 2023; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Soft skills are broadly defined as non-technical attributes that enable individuals to communicate effectively, think critically, and build productive relationships (Lamri & Lubart, 2023). These competencies differ from hard skills in that they are transferable across professions and contribute to both individual and organizational success. In business education, soft skills development is fundamental since students are expected to manage diverse teams, negotiate with clients, and make ethical and strategic decisions in complex business environments (Chen & Wang, 2020). Research has shown that business graduates with strong soft skills demonstrate superior job performance and higher employability outcomes compared to those who possess only technical abilities (Mainga et al., 2024). However, despite their recognized importance, soft skills are often underemphasized in university curricula, which traditionally focus on technical and theoretical instruction (Romanenko et al., 2024).

In the Philippine context, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has emphasized the importance of developing "21st-century skills," which include creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking—the so-called 4Cs—integral to business and management education (CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, 2019). Nonetheless, existing programs in many universities still exhibit gaps in systematically measuring and developing these competencies. Studies conducted among Filipino business students reveal moderate proficiency levels in key soft skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving, indicating a need for stronger curricular alignment and experiential learning strategies (Arratia Barrantes et al., 2023).

At the West Visayas State University (WVSU) College of Business and Management, this concern is particularly relevant, as the institution aims to prepare graduates who can adapt to diverse professional contexts. However, limited empirical assessment has been conducted to evaluate the actual level of soft skills among business students. Addressing this research gap is crucial to ensuring that WVSU's programs meet the demands of local and global employers, particularly in the context of post-pandemic workforce transformations that highlight flexibility, teamwork, and innovative thinking (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

This study, therefore, assessed the development of five core soft skills—communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity—among third- and fourth-year business students at WVSU. Grounded in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Competency-Based Theory (Mulder, 2017), it examined the level of soft skills proficiency and determined whether differences existed across sex, year level, and course. The findings aim to provide evidence-based insights to enhance curriculum design, align learning outcomes with industry expectations, and strengthen the employability and professional readiness of business graduates.

Aim and Research Questions

Aim

The study aimed to **assess the development of soft skills among business students** at West Visayas State University, focusing on five core competencies: communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and

creativity. It also sought to determine whether differences existed in the development of these skills when students were classified according to sex, year level, and course.

Research Questions

The study specifically sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of communication skills among undergraduate business students as a whole and when classified according to:
 - a. sex
 - b. year level
 - c. course
2. What is the level of problem-solving abilities among undergraduate business students as a whole and when classified according to:
 - a. sex
 - b. year level
 - c. course
3. What is the level of leadership skills among undergraduate business students as a whole and when classified according to:
 - a. sex
 - b. year level
 - c. course
4. What is the level of decision-making skills among undergraduate business students as a whole and when classified according to:
 - a. sex
 - b. year level
 - c. course
5. What is the level of creativity skills among undergraduate business students as a whole and when classified according to:
 - a. sex
 - b. year level
 - c. course
6. Are there significant differences in the levels of communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity skills when students are grouped according to sex, year level, and course?
7. Is there a significant relationship among communication skills, problem-solving abilities, leadership skills, decision-making skills, and creativity skills of business students?

Null Hypotheses

In line with the stated research questions, the following **null hypotheses** were tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the communication skills of business students when classified according to sex, year level, and course.
2. There is no significant difference in the problem-solving abilities of business students when classified according to sex, year level, and course.
3. There is no significant difference in the leadership skills of business students when classified according to sex, year level, and course.
4. There is no significant difference in the decision-making skills of business students when classified according to sex, year level, and course.
5. There is no significant difference in the creativity skills of business students when classified according to sex, year level, and course.

6. There is no significant relationship among the five identified soft skills—communication skills, problem-solving abilities, leadership skills, decision-making skills, and creativity skills—of business students.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Competency-Based Theory (Mulder, 2017), both emphasizing the value of education in developing human potential. Human Capital Theory posits that investments in education and training enhance individuals' productivity and employability, with soft skills—such as communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity—serving as vital components of human capital that improve career readiness and organizational effectiveness (Bernardo et al., 2023; Chen & Wang, 2020). Complementing this, Competency-Based Theory underscores the systematic identification and development of measurable competencies that integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for professional performance (Romanenko et al., 2024). Within the business education context, the convergence of these theories highlights that cultivating soft skills not only strengthens students' human capital but also ensures competency-based learning outcomes aligned with industry demands and the evolving needs of the global workforce.

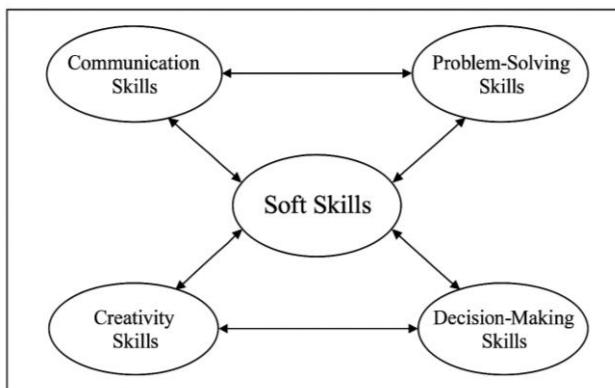


Figure 1. Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study on *Soft Skills Development among Business Students*. The framework presents the relationship between personal factors—specifically sex, year level, and course—as the independent variables, and soft skills development as the dependent variable. Soft skills development is operationalized through five key dimensions: communication skills, problem-solving abilities, leadership skills, decision-making skills, and creativity skills. Arrows indicate the direction of influence, suggesting that variations in personal factors may affect the level of students' soft skills development. The central construct, "Soft Skills," represents the overall competency profile of business students, integrating these five interrelated domains. This framework aligns with Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes education as an investment in skill enhancement (Becker, 1964), and Competency-Based Theory, which focuses on developing measurable, performance-oriented skills (Mulder, 2017). Together, these theoretical perspectives justify the assessment of soft skills as essential components of employability and professional readiness in business education.

2. Review of Related Literature

Soft skills have emerged as a critical determinant of employability and success in the modern workplace, particularly for business graduates. These non-technical competencies—such as communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity—enhance individuals' ability to collaborate, innovate, and adapt to evolving organizational demands (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). According to Chen and Wang (2020), soft skills play a decisive role in improving work performance and fostering career advancement. Employers increasingly view

these skills as vital in addressing global business challenges that require emotional intelligence, teamwork, and adaptability (Bernardo et al., 2023). In the higher education context, the integration of soft skills into business programs has been emphasized as essential for preparing students to navigate the dynamic global economy and meet the expectations of employers in diverse professional settings (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Studies in both local and international settings demonstrate that business students' proficiency in soft skills remains uneven, with communication and problem-solving often ranking highest while creativity and leadership receive less focus in academic curricula. Arratia Barrantes et al. (2023) reported that only 36.7% of business students in Philippine universities achieved a high level of soft skills, indicating a curricular gap in fostering holistic development. Similarly, Romanenko et al. (2024) found that while universities acknowledge the importance of soft skills, the measurement and systematic cultivation of these competencies are often inconsistent. This gap aligns with Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023), who highlighted the challenges of integrating the "4Cs"—communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity—into traditional academic models that primarily emphasize theoretical and technical learning. Addressing these deficiencies requires curriculum reform and active learning strategies that promote reflection, collaboration, and innovation among students.

Globally, higher education institutions are reorienting their curricula toward competency-based models to strengthen students' soft skills as integral aspects of employability. The McKinsey Global Institute (2021) identified social and emotional competencies as the most in-demand attributes in the post-pandemic workforce, underscoring the importance of resilience, adaptability, and interpersonal communication. In business education, competency-based approaches ensure that students acquire both technical and behavioral skills necessary for professional success (Mulder, 2017). In the Philippine context, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, 2019) also mandates the development of 21st-century skills, emphasizing the need for creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and effective communication. Thus, fostering these competencies in business students does not only enhance academic performance but also contributes to their overall human capital, equipping them to perform effectively in diverse and competitive industries.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a **descriptive-correlational quantitative research design** to assess the level of soft skills development among undergraduate business students of West Visayas State University, College of Business and Management. The design was chosen to describe the current state of students' soft skills and to determine the relationships and significant differences when grouped according to demographic variables. This approach was appropriate because it enabled the researchers to collect quantifiable data from a defined population and statistically analyze variations and correlations among the identified variables.

Participants

The study involved 163 third-year and fourth-year business students enrolled in different programs under the College of Business and Management during the academic year 2024–2025. The participants were selected through simple random sampling, ensuring equal representation from the five major programs: Bachelor of Science in Business Administration major in Financial Management, Operations Management, Cooperatives Management, Tourism Management, and Hospitality Management. Respondents were categorized according to sex, year level, and course, which served as the independent variables of the study.

Research Instrument

A researcher-made questionnaire was used to collect the data. The instrument consisted of 30 items covering five dimensions of soft skills development: communication skills, problem-solving abilities, leadership skills, decision-making skills, and creativity skills—each represented by six items. The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale,

where responses ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*), allowing for a detailed assessment of each skill area. Prior to data collection, the instrument underwent content validation by experts in business education and research, and a pilot test was conducted to determine internal consistency. The resulting Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicated high reliability, confirming the instrument's appropriateness for the study.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers secured formal permission from the Dean of the College of Business and Management and distributed the questionnaire online through Google Forms. The link was disseminated to respondents via academic group chats. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed about the study's purpose and confidentiality protocols. Data collection took place from March to April 2025. Responses were automatically recorded and organized in a secure spreadsheet for analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive analysis included frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations to describe respondents' demographic characteristics and their levels of soft skills. For inferential analysis, an independent samples t-test was used to determine significant differences in soft skills when grouped by sex and year level, while a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was applied to test for differences across courses. A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was conducted to examine relationships among the five identified soft skills. All tests were set at a 0.05 level of significance.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical standards in conducting research involving human participants. Prior to the administration of the instrument, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, ensuring their understanding of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any point. No personal identifiers were collected, ensuring participant anonymity. The data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Level of Communication Skills of Undergraduate Business Students as a Whole and When Classified According to Sex, Year Level, and Course

Classification	Mean	Interpretation
Overall	4.36	Expert
Sex (Male)	4.28	Expert
Sex (Female)	4.39	Expert
Year Level (3rd Year)	4.32	Expert
Year Level (4th Year)	4.41	Expert
Course (FM)	4.42	Expert
Course (OM)	4.33	Expert
Course (CM)	4.30	Expert
Course (HM)	4.35	Expert
Course (TM)	4.36	Expert

As shown in Table 1, business students demonstrated an expert level of communication skills ($M = 4.36$), indicating strong proficiency in conveying information, expressing ideas clearly, and participating effectively in group settings. When grouped by sex, both male and female respondents scored at the expert level, suggesting uniform

communication competence across genders. Fourth-year students slightly outperformed third-year students, likely reflecting their exposure to internships and practical courses that enhance professional communication. The results align with Mainga et al. (2024), who emphasized that communication is a top employability skill among business graduates.

Table 2. Level of Problem-Solving Abilities of Undergraduate Business Students as a Whole and When Classified According to Sex, Year Level, and Course

Classification	Mean	Interpretation
Overall	4.28	Proficient
Sex (Male)	4.24	Proficient
Sex (Female)	4.29	Proficient
Year Level (3rd Year)	4.21	Proficient
Year Level (4th Year)	4.32	Expert
Course (FM)	4.34	Expert
Course (OM)	4.25	Proficient
Course (CM)	4.18	Proficient
Course (HM)	4.22	Proficient
Course (TM)	4.29	Proficient

Table 2 reveals that students obtained a proficient level of problem-solving abilities ($M = 4.28$), showing their capability to assess business challenges and apply logical reasoning to solutions. A marginal difference emerged between third- and fourth-year students, where the latter attained an expert level, suggesting that progression in the program contributes to higher analytical ability. The results reflect the findings of Heldal (2023), which highlighted that structured problem-solving instruction enhances teamwork, creativity, and innovation among business students.

Table 3. Level of Leadership Skills of Undergraduate Business Students as a Whole and When Classified According to Sex, Year Level, and Course

Classification	Mean	Interpretation
Overall	4.30	Expert
Sex (Male)	4.27	Expert
Sex (Female)	4.31	Expert
Year Level (3rd Year)	4.22	Proficient
Year Level (4th Year)	4.36	Expert
Course (FM)	4.35	Expert
Course (OM)	4.28	Expert
Course (CM)	4.26	Expert
Course (HM)	4.29	Expert
Course (TM)	4.33	Expert

As shown in Table 3, students achieved an overall expert level in leadership skills ($M = 4.30$). Fourth-year students displayed slightly higher leadership proficiency, possibly due to experience in student organizations and management simulations. This finding supports Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022), who reported that leadership training improves engagement and interpersonal dynamics. The result also validates the argument of Johnston (2023) that effective leadership among students is fostered by empathy, responsibility, and decision-making maturity.

Table 4. Level of Decision-Making Skills of Undergraduate Business Students as a Whole and When Classified According to Sex, Year Level, and Course

Classification	Mean	Interpretation
Overall	4.24	Proficient
Sex (Male)	4.22	Proficient
Sex (Female)	4.25	Proficient
Year Level (3rd Year)	4.18	Proficient
Year Level (4th Year)	4.29	Expert
Course (FM)	4.32	Expert
Course (OM)	4.26	Proficient
Course (CM)	4.20	Proficient
Course (HM)	4.22	Proficient
Course (TM)	4.25	Proficient

The results in Table 4 indicate a proficient level of decision-making skills ($M = 4.24$) among students, suggesting that they are capable of evaluating alternatives and choosing optimal solutions. Fourth-year students exhibited slightly higher scores, implying that maturity and academic exposure contribute to more refined decision-making judgment. These findings resonate with the study of Morelli et al. (2022), which linked decision-making proficiency with cognitive flexibility and rational evaluation—core abilities nurtured through business education.

Table 5. Level of Creativity Skills of Undergraduate Business Students as a Whole and When Classified According to Sex, Year Level, and Course

Classification	Mean	Interpretation
Overall	4.26	Proficient
Sex (Male)	4.19	Proficient
Sex (Female)	4.28	Proficient
Year Level (3rd Year)	4.20	Proficient
Year Level (4th Year)	4.33	Expert
Course (FM)	4.35	Expert
Course (OM)	4.24	Proficient
Course (CM)	4.21	Proficient
Course (HM)	4.27	Proficient
Course (TM)	4.29	Proficient

As presented in Table 5, respondents attained a proficient level of creativity ($M = 4.26$), indicating the ability to generate innovative ideas and propose practical solutions. The fourth-year group showed stronger creativity scores, likely due to project-based courses encouraging originality. These results mirror Fan and Cai's (2022) findings that creative environments in higher education foster cognitive flexibility and innovation. The slight gender gap observed favors females, consistent with global trends where women tend to excel in collaborative creativity tasks (Ritter et al., 2020).

Table 6. Correlation among Communication Skills, Problem-Solving Abilities, Leadership Skills, Decision-Making Skills, and Creativity Skills

Variables	Pearson r	p-value	Interpretation
Communication – Problem Solving	0.71	0.000	Significant
Communication – Leadership	0.69	0.000	Significant
Problem Solving – Decision Making	0.74	0.000	Significant
Leadership – Creativity	0.68	0.000	Significant
Decision Making – Creativity	0.66	0.000	Significant

Table 6 presents the Pearson correlation results, indicating significant positive relationships among all five dimensions of soft skills. The strongest association was observed between problem-solving and decision-making ($r = 0.74$, $p < .05$), signifying that students who excel in analytical thinking also tend to make sound judgments. These findings affirm the integrated nature of soft skills development, where enhancing one competency contributes to the improvement of others. This supports the view of Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023) that the “4Cs” of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking are interdependent skills essential for holistic personal and professional growth.

Summary of Results

The study assessed the level of soft skills development among 163 business students from the College of Business and Management at West Visayas State University, focusing on five core competencies: communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity. Results showed that respondents demonstrated generally high proficiency across all skill domains, with mean ratings ranging from 4.24 to 4.36, interpreted as proficient to expert levels. Among the five dimensions, communication skills obtained the highest mean ($M = 4.36$), indicating that students were capable of articulating ideas clearly, engaging effectively in discussions, and expressing professional competence in written and oral communication. This was followed by leadership skills ($M = 4.30$) and problem-solving abilities ($M = 4.28$), which reflected students' ability to guide teams, make informed decisions, and apply logical reasoning in resolving complex issues. Meanwhile, creativity ($M = 4.26$) and decision-making skills ($M = 4.24$) also achieved proficient levels, suggesting that students could generate innovative ideas and evaluate multiple alternatives before drawing conclusions.

When classified according to sex, results revealed no significant differences across the five soft skills areas, implying that both male and female students demonstrated similar competency levels. However, when grouped by year level and course, significant differences were observed. Fourth-year students consistently scored higher than third-year students, suggesting that progression through the program—and greater exposure to experiential learning activities—enhanced students' soft skills. Courses such as Financial Management and Tourism Management recorded slightly higher means, reflecting more applied learning and leadership opportunities in these specializations. Furthermore, correlation analysis showed strong, positive, and significant relationships among all five soft skills domains, particularly between problem-solving and decision-making ($r = 0.74$, $p < .05$). This implies that the development of one soft skill reinforces others, confirming the interrelated nature of these competencies.

Overall, the findings indicate that business students of West Visayas State University possess high levels of soft skills, consistent with the university's mission of developing competent and industry-ready graduates. However, the significant variations between year levels and programs suggest a need for continuous curriculum enhancement to strengthen creative and decision-making competencies. The results affirm the relevance of integrating soft skills training into academic programs, as these competencies collectively improve employability, adaptability, and overall professional readiness among business students.

Implications of the Results

The results of the study carry important implications for business education, curriculum development, and workforce preparation. The high level of soft skills among business students implies that the university's existing programs and pedagogical approaches effectively foster critical interpersonal and cognitive competencies. This demonstrates that intentional exposure to collaborative learning, case studies, and leadership-oriented activities enhances students' readiness for the professional environment. The strong positive relationships among communication, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity suggest that these competencies are mutually reinforcing; hence, a holistic instructional approach that integrates all five areas can yield greater student development.

For educators, the findings highlight the need to sustain and institutionalize soft skills training across all business courses. Faculty members should be equipped with strategies that promote teamwork, reflective learning, and problem-solving engagement to ensure consistent skill acquisition among students. For curriculum planners, the results underscore the importance of aligning course outcomes with employability standards and global competency frameworks such as those identified by the World Economic Forum (2020). This alignment ensures that graduates are competitive not only in technical knowledge but also in adaptive and leadership capabilities required in contemporary workplaces.

From an institutional perspective, the study supports the implementation of competency-based education and assessment systems, allowing the university to measure and enhance students' soft skills development continuously. Administrators can utilize the findings to strengthen industry linkages, internship programs, and co-curricular activities that provide authentic platforms for applying soft skills. At the policy level, the study reinforces the relevance of the Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) mandate to develop 21st-century competencies through integrative and experiential learning. Ultimately, these implications affirm that soft skills are not supplementary but foundational elements of business education that shape employable, ethical, and innovative graduates capable of contributing to organizational and societal advancement.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that business students of West Visayas State University possess generally high levels of soft skills, with proficiency and expertise demonstrated across communication, problem-solving, leadership, decision-making, and creativity. The results confirmed that these competencies are interrelated and collectively contribute to students' overall academic and professional readiness. Differences were observed when grouped according to year level and course, indicating that higher academic exposure and engagement in applied learning experiences enhance soft skills development. However, no significant difference was found when grouped by sex, suggesting equitable competency acquisition among male and female students. The significant correlations among the five domains further affirm that strengthening one soft skill can reinforce others, supporting the integrated nature of these competencies. Anchored on Human Capital and Competency-Based theories, the results imply that continuous investment in soft skills education enriches students' human capital, equipping them with essential attributes for employability, leadership, and success in a dynamic business environment. Thus, the study concludes that the university's business programs are effective in nurturing essential interpersonal and cognitive skills, yet continuous refinement of instructional strategies is necessary to sustain and elevate these competencies across all programs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the College of Business and Management continue to strengthen its curriculum by integrating structured activities that enhance soft skills such as leadership, creativity, and decision-making. Faculty members are encouraged to adopt experiential and participatory learning strategies, including

simulations, group case analyses, and project-based assessments, to allow students to apply soft skills in authentic business contexts. Curriculum developers should incorporate measurable soft skill outcomes in every course, supported by workshops and mentorship programs that foster critical thinking and innovation. Collaboration with industry partners is also advised to ensure that the competencies developed align with current labor market demands. Administrators should establish continuous assessment systems to monitor the progression of students' soft skills throughout their academic journey. Future researchers are encouraged to replicate the study across other disciplines or institutions to validate the findings and explore additional variables such as internship experiences and extracurricular involvement. By reinforcing these recommendations, higher education institutions can ensure that graduates possess not only technical expertise but also the interpersonal and decision-making competencies vital for leadership and long-term professional success.

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