



Exploring Knowledge Gaps in Merchandising Curriculums: Perceptions of Recent Retail Internship Participants

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In customer-centric industries, as digital disruption has rendered many jobs obsolete, it has increased customers' demand for meaningful interactions with brands' human touchpoints. This has led to growing employer demand for soft skills (Teng et al., 2019). These uniquely human capabilities are a combination of one's personal qualities, interpersonal skills, and the additional skills/knowledge they utilize in both their personal and professional lives (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Crawford et al. (2011) and Crawford and Dalton (2016) conceptualize soft skills as behavioral, social and cognitive abilities that include the following clusters: communication skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills, teamwork skills, and leadership skills. Soft skills are instrumental in helping employees navigate uncertainties in the work environment. This highlights their importance in rapidly evolving business sectors (e.g., retail, tourism), and for responding to unpredictability in the larger market environment (e.g., economic volatility, technological change, global pandemics; Ritter et al., 2018; Wesley et al., 2017). Despite the mounting need for job seekers to demonstrate both soft and hard skill competencies, LinkedIn's 2018 Workforce Report confirmed that a soft skill mismatch exists between the skill sets that companies are seeking and those possessed by top talent (Behesti, 2018). These findings have also emerged through scholarly research that explored employer perceptions of recent college graduates' employability (e.g., Wesley et al., 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Academic programs primarily design their core curriculums around the technical, or "hard" skills, that graduates will need to obtain jobs in their respective fields, and research suggests that the teaching of soft skills in many academic disciplines is very poor (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). However, there is a growing body of research on graduates' soft skill competencies that is being conducted across a range of academic program areas (e.g., engineering, accounting, data science, business) and using data collected from universities in many global regions (Americas, Asia, Europe). The research findings all suggest that the workforce of the future must be multi-skilled, and equipped with soft skills infused with technical expertise (Caeiro-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Dean & East, 2019; Rebele & Pierre, 2019; Teng et al., 2019; Zuo et al., 2019). Therefore, to continue producing career ready graduates, academic programs should evaluate the extent to which their curriculums employ experiential and collaborative learning environments to nurture students' soft skill development. Through this process, knowledge gaps can be identified, and targeted interventions can be implemented to address these deficiencies.

Most undergraduate retail merchandising programs require a professional development course that integrates soft skills, which students often take in their sophomore or junior year (Wesley et al., 2017). However, these courses may not be personalized to students' individual

soft skill needs or tailored to the retail industry (Jacobs & Karpova, 2019). Another common feature of most retail programs is the internship requirement, which is typically completed during students' junior or senior year and provides students with invaluable real-world job experience (Nickson et al., 2017; Robeck et al., 2013). While these integral components of the collegiate retail curriculum lend themselves to soft skill development, they are not enough to fully equip students with the soft skill competencies necessary for career success (Robeck et al., 2013). Instead, retail programs must consider how they can incorporate soft skill development opportunities into all courses in their curricula (Caeiro-Rodríguez et al., 2021). This is necessary because soft skills are "natural attributes" that are highly subjective (Crawford & Dalton, 2016). Everyone has an innate level of soft skill proficiency that is inherent to their personality. Any increase in individuals' soft skill proficiency must be cultivated and refined over time, meaning that soft skill development is an ongoing process that takes place throughout one's collegiate experience and professional career (Pandey & Pandey, 2015).

The purpose of this pilot study is to explore retail students' perceptions of their career readiness as they approach graduation, and in doing so, identify knowledge gaps in the curriculum of study. Using in-depth literature review, the researchers explicated the top soft skills and core competencies that graduates must possess to secure jobs in retail (Jacobs & Karpova, 2019; Nickson et al., 2017). The researchers also compared the curriculums of four other retail programs in the Midwest region to determine whether the course offerings and sequence of classes were similar. The researchers confirmed that courses that provide opportunities for soft skill development (e.g., professional development course, internship course) were standard across the programs, meaning that findings from the sample program have relevance for other retail programs interested in evaluating their curricula. Students from a retail program at a university in the Midwestern United States comprised the sample for this pilot study. Forty-one undergraduate seniors who had just completed their required internship in summer 2021 were emailed a link to a Qualtrics survey. The IRB-approved cover letter/landing page explained the study's purpose, risks, and indicated that by clicking "begin" to start the survey, students were consenting to participate. The survey contained 10 open-ended questions and 10 multiple-choice questions on a 5-point Likert scale. Survey questions related to required courses in the program (e.g., which courses best prepared students for their internships) and preparedness for the internship (e.g., technical and soft skills most applicable to students' internships). Participants were also asked to suggest courses that would have been useful to take before completing their internship.

Data collection garnered 40 usable responses, a response rate of 97.6 percent. The high response rate suggests that participants were eager to provide their perceptions on the efficacy of the program's curriculum. Ninety-two percent of students were satisfied with the courses they had taken prior to their internship and felt that they were properly prepared beforehand. Only eight percent of students were unsatisfied. The reasoning behind this dissatisfaction was partially due to selection of their internship site; however, most of these respondents still mentioned that they had the necessary retail merchandising knowledge to complete their internship. The final open-ended question asked students to recommend skills or courses that should be included in

the curriculum and required before participating in the internship. Fifty-two percent of participants suggested additional coursework in professional development, and specifically, building communication, teamwork, and leadership capabilities. There were also requests for portfolio and resume building classes tailored specifically to the retail industry. Additional coursework was suggested in the areas of management, customer service, and international relations. The remaining 48 percent of students either did not provide recommendations or suggested courses already included in the program's curriculum.

This study's findings have relevance for retail programs across the U.S. as they show a brief analysis of the knowledge gaps found in this mid-sized university's retail curriculum. The program of study already places emphasis on soft skill development in many required courses. However, the findings indicate that students desire even more opportunities for specific soft skill development (e.g., leadership). Soft skill competencies also underscored many of the additional retail courses that were suggested. For example, more customer service coursework would further equip students with communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills. More international relations coursework would allow students to strengthen their aptitude for cross-cultural communication, an essential soft skill for navigating the highly global retail industry. The results show that, as they approached graduation, students in the sample were satisfied with their level of technical retail knowledge, yet desired more soft skill building. This pilot study focused on one university's retail program, with only 40 senior retail merchandising students surveyed. Therefore, further investigation using a larger sample of merchandising curriculums and students is necessary to gain a better understanding of the knowledge and soft skill gaps in retail merchandising curriculums across the United States. Programs can then address deficiencies that emerge through the findings to strengthen the career readiness of future graduates.

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