# Did participation in the Conover Workplace® modules improve Nunez Community College students' work readiness?

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**Abstract**

A mismatch remains between the skill sets employers seek in new hires and the applicants' skills. A quasi-experimental research design was used to investigate whether students' oral, written, and digital skill sets were improved after participation in the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program coursework, which included embedded Conover Workplace Readiness® modules at Nunez Community College. Data were analyzed using the (a) grades for quality enhancement program-dedicated courses, (b) rubric scores from General Education Student Learning Outcomes, (c) Likert-type scores from quality enhancement program student workshop and training surveys, and (d) Likert-type scores from Faculty workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® module satisfaction survey. The evidence (e.g., grades, mastery of learning outcomes) showed significant improvement in students' oral, written, and digital skills after participation in Geaux Pro quality enhancement courses, workshops, and Conover Workplace Readiness® modules, resulting in improved employability skills. This study has implications for addressing community college students' work readiness.

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## Abstract

A mismatch remains between the skill sets that employers seek in new hires and the skills applicants possess. A quasi-experimental research design was used to investigate whether students' oral, written, and digital skill sets were improved after participation in the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program coursework, which included embedded Conover Workplace Readiness® modules at Nunez Community College. Data were analyzed using the (a) grades for quality enhancement program-dedicated courses, (b) rubric scores from General Education Student Learning Outcomes, (c) Likert-type scores from quality enhancement program student workshop and training surveys, and (d) Likert-type scores from Faculty workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® module satisfaction survey. The evidence (e.g., grades, mastery of learning outcomes) showed significant improvement in students' oral, written, and digital skills after participation in Geaux Pro quality enhancement courses, workshops, and Conover Workplace Readiness® modules, resulting in improved employability skills. This study has implications for addressing community college students' work readiness.



## Keywords

Soft skills, work readiness, online soft skill training, quality enhancement program, community college


## Highlights

- Students' work readiness can be improved through participation in an embedded online soft skill training program such as Conover Workplace Readiness®
- Embedded online training programs can enhance community college curricula.
- Quality enhancement programs can be used to improve students' work readiness.
- Students' confidence levels regarding acquiring soft skills could affect their work readiness levels.

## Introduction

Although the current jobless rate in the United States is 3.7%, many jobs remain unfilled, leaving employers with a massive labor shortage. Employers across the nation struggle to fill close to 11 million open positions. For example, in Louisiana, 89,100 positions are unfilled (U.S. DLS, 2022). Louisiana state government has experienced 52% fewer job applications in the past two years, reflecting spillover from the labor shortage disruption in the private sector (Sentell, 2022). This shortage is possibly a result of factors related to the pandemic: employees retiring, parents leaving the workforce to care for their children, and losing 2 million adult

immigrant workers (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2022). The national and state labor shortages have created significant obstacles for small businesses and exacerbated supply chain problems with many major retailers (e.g., Macy's), chain restaurants (e.g., Chipotle, McDonald's, Starbucks), and private businesses reducing their hours of operation. Despite the abundance of job openings in public and private sectors in Louisiana, a mismatch remains between the skill sets that employers seek in new hires and the skills applicants possess (U.S. DLS, 2022).

The question centers around the pivotal role that community colleges traditionally had in preparing students with the skills necessary to perform the essential functions of their positions and whether that mission remains relevant in the current labor market and during the pandemic. During an October 2021 board meeting, Higher Education Commissioner Harrison Keller said that the expectation of educational leadership was that enrollment in community colleges would increase during the pandemic, as they have historically done when unemployment increases during economic recessions and students seek inexpensive alternatives to upskilling or retooling in their preparation to re-enter the workforce (McGee, 2021). However, there was a significant decrease of 11.58% in student enrollment at community colleges since the pandemic began in 2019. (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Meanwhile, enrollment at public universities increased by 2%, independent university enrollments showed no increase, and health-related institution enrollments increased by 10% (NSCRC, 2022). Although, Nunez Community College, the one outlier among Louisiana community colleges, reported a 3% growth in student enrollment (NSCRC,2022)

The central argument lies in the value of training in soft skills, employability skills, and work readiness within the community college setting. Professional skills or abilities, including attitude, communication (e.g., oral, written, digital skills), planning and organizing, critical thinking, interpersonal/social skills, teamwork, professionalism, and media rules are the focus of this article, following Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence framework. When using terms such as "soft skills," we are referencing a specific set of work readiness skills (Lyu & Liu, 2021). The focus on these employability skills is based on the research regarding the skill sets that employers need workers to possess (Capelli, 2015; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021; Rhew et al., 2019), expanding the evidence that solid work readiness skills are positively related to social, career, and vocational outcomes (Bosch, 2018), and the missions of community colleges to ready students for the workplace and to serve their communities. The primary assumption regarding work readiness and community colleges is that students can obtain gainful employment after completing a technical certificate or two-year education at a community college.

An increasing focus of research and local, state, and federal policymakers is whether community colleges have the capability to provide all of the skills necessary for a worker to upskill or retool, meeting industry demands for fully qualified workers (Cotner et al., 2021; Holzer, 2021; Yamashita & Cummins, 2021). Many community colleges use traditional curriculums that do not prepare students with the soft skills required for the 21st Century workplace (Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether students' oral, written, and digital skill sets were improved after participation in the quality enhancement program coursework, which included embedded online Conover Workplace Readiness® modules at Nunez Community College. Specifically, Nunez Community College

implemented the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program to improve students' professional communication skills (e.g., oral skills, written skills, digital skills), resulting in improved work readiness and employability.

## Conceptual Framework

Daniel Goleman's (1995) two-factor emotional intelligence (EI) model, based on Salovey and Meyer's four-branch EI model, provides the conceptual framework for this study. Salovey and Meyer's (1990) early definition of emotional intelligence was "the ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and how to use the information to guide thinking and behavior" (p. 107). Goleman expanded on that definition, indicating that emotional intelligence is "a person's ability to manage their feelings so that those feelings are expressed appropriately and effectively" (p. 107). Expressing emotions appropriately and effectively is a part of a person's oral and written communication skills (Goleman, 1995). According to Goleman (1995), "emotional intelligence is the largest single predictor of success in the workplace" (p. 2).

Goleman (1995) expanded Salovey and Meyer's (1990) EI model, incorporating four emotional intelligence constructs, including (a) *self-awareness*, which is an individual's ability to comprehend their feelings and the effect they have on other people while employing intuition to guide their decision making, (b) *self-management*, which is an individual's ability to self-regulate their mood and impulsivity, making adjustments to environmental circumstances, (c) *social awareness*, which is an individual's ability to identify and understand another individual's feelings while understanding group social interactions and connections, and (d) *relationship management,* which is a person's capability to manage interpersonal conflicts while making a positive impact or by influencing other people through positive personal development (Goleman, 1998).

Goleman (1995) challenged the assumptions of skill-based intelligence theories, igniting interest in evidence-based investigation of emotional intelligences. Goleman's (1998) two-factor EI model includes two factors (e.g., social, personal) with three associated competencies (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation). Goleman (1998) argued that emotional intelligence competencies were not natural talents; rather they are learned. Therefore, an individual must learn and develop emotional intelligence competencies to achieve excellent performance levels (Goleman, 1998). Further, Goleman (1998) proposed that emotional intelligence ability is pre-determined at birth; however, it could also be taught. Goleman's (1998) two-factor EI model was designed for use in the work setting to identify competencies of excellent performers. The competency-based emotional intelligence framework of Goleman's (1998) EI model provides a bridging mechanism to fill the gap between the skill sets employers seek in community college graduates and the graduates' existing skill sets.

## Soft Skills

For over a century, soft skills have been recognized as an essential component of a successful organization (Mann, 1918). Research conducted in 1918 by Charles Riborg Mann (1918), a Harvard University professor, indicated that "85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft and people skills, and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge (hard skills)" (p. 107). Soft skills are a part of Goleman's (1998) social and personal factors. Soft skills include the ability to communicate effectively, interact well with others, think critically, maintain a positive attitude, work well in a team, and plan and organize (Bosch,

2018). Identifying and managing soft skills is correlated with increased employee productivity (Capelli, 2015). The soft skills literature has identified effective communication, problem-solving, trust, motivation, and enthusiasm as important soft skills( Ellis et al., 2014; Rasul et al., 2013; Wahl et al., 2012). Further, soft skills are an essential part of an organization's success (Dana et al., 2011). A worker's lack of hard and soft skills often negatively affects organizational outcomes (e.g., employee engagement, safety, attendance, and retention; Bosch, 2018). The main assumption of this study is that soft skill training can improve Nunez College student work readiness levels.

**Nunez Community College Quality Enhancement Program**

Given the national and state focus on employees' *soft skills* and *work readiness*, Nunez Community College launched a quality enhancement program (QEP) in 2016 designed to improve students' work readiness with a specific focus on student learning, faculty professional development, and assessment regarding professional communication (e.g., oral communication, written communication, digital communication). The QEP involved three initiatives: ongoing workshops led by faculty (e.g., resumes, interview skills), faculty professional development, and the online Conover Workplace Readiness® program. The professional communication coursework involved three sequential communication courses incorporating work skill training from the Conover Work Readiness® program. The training provided in the online Conover Work Readiness® Program is based on the premise that emotional competencies can be taught (Goleman, 1998). Each of the soft skill areas included in the Conover Work Readiness® modules correlates with Goleman's (1998) Emotional Intelligence Competencies. Table 1 provides an overview of the correlation of the soft skills in the Conover Work Readiness® Modules to Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Competencies.

**Table 1**

*Work readiness Soft Skills Area Correlation to Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Competencies*

| Work Readiness Soft Skill Area | Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Competencies |
|---|---|
| Attitude | Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Awareness, Empathy, Self-Management, Self-Improvement |
| Communication | Interpersonal Awareness, Empathy, Self-Esteem, Sales Orientation/Leadership, Assertion |
| Planning and Organizing | Self-Management, Goal Setting, Self-Efficacy, Drive Strength/Motivation/ Achievement Drive, Time Management, Decision Making, Commitment |
| Critical Thinking | Problem Solving, Decision Making |
| Interpersonal/Social Skills | Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Awareness, Empathy, Supportive Environment, Assertion |
| Teamwork | Interpersonal Awareness, Interpersonal Assertion, Empathy, Sales Orientation/Leadership, Supportive Environment. |
| Professionalism | Self-esteem, Interpersonal Awareness, Self-Management, Self-Improvement |
| Media Rules | Decision Making, Time Management |

Adapted from "White Paper January 2015 Conover Credential™ Workplace Readiness*"* by Terry Schmitz, Conover Company. Copyright 2015 by Conover Company, A Division of Oakwood Solutions, LLC. Adapted with permission.

## Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

**RQ1.** What differences, if any, are there between college students' mean QEP course grades for the 2020–2021 school year and the 2021–2022 school year after participation in the Conover© work readiness program?

**RQ2**. What mastery level did students achieve for oral and written communication as measured by the general education learning assessment outcome scores for the 2020–2021 school year?

**RQ3**. What are teachers' perceptions regarding whether students' oral, written, and digital communication skills improved after participation in the QEP-dedicated course or Conover Workplace Readiness® modules ©?

**RQ4**. What mastery level did students achieve for oral and written communication as measured by the general education learning assessment outcome scores for the 2020–2021 school year?

## Methods

A quantitative quasi-experimental research method was used to investigate whether students' oral, written, and digital skill sets improved after implementing the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program at Nunez Community College. The three-step process included examining:

1. Courses: Spring 2021 QEP and Spring 2022 QEP for differences in students' mean grades.
2. Assessments: Fall 2021 Student Learning Outcomes to determine mastery levels of oral and written communication skills achieved by students after participation in the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program (the student learning outcomes are reported using a 4-point grading rubric).
3. Surveys
    a. (a) Spring 2021/Spring 2022 QEP student workshop survey and training surveys.
    b. (b) Spring 2022 Faculty workshop and training and Conover© Module satisfaction survey that included 5-item Likert-type questions and open-ended questions used to explore the perspectives of college students and faculty members regarding whether students' oral, written, and digital communication skills improved after participation in the QEP-dedicated course or Conover Workplace Readiness® workshops.

### *Population*

The targeted population was (a) students enrolled in QEP-dedicated courses and workshops and (b) faculty members who completed a faculty satisfaction survey for the Conover© work readiness modules and the QEP workshops.

### *Sample*

The sample included the de-identified archival data (a) Spring 2021 (n = 473) and Spring 2022 grades for QEP-dedicated courses (n = 355). (b) Student Spring 2021/Spring 2022 QEP workshop and training surveys (n = 56), (c) Spring 2022 Faculty workshop and Conover© satisfaction survey (n = 16), and (d) Spring 2022 General Education Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (N = 858). Data were obtained from Nunez College's research department.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Prior to any data collection, permission from the Nunez Community College Institutional Review Board was obtained on June 12th, 2022. The de-identified archival data (a) Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 Grades for QEP-dedicated courses. (b) Student Spring 2021/Spring 2022 QEP workshop and training surveys, (c) Spring 2022 Faculty workshop and Conover© satisfaction survey, and (d) the Fall 2021 General Education Assessment Student Learning Outcomes were obtained from the Nunez College research department after Institutional Review Board approval was obtained.

The Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 grades for QEP-dedicated courses were analyzed using an independent-samples *t* test and descriptive statistics. The Fall 2021 General Education Student Learning Outcomes Assessment outcomes were analyzed using an independent-samples *t* test and descriptive statistics. The 2021 and 2022 QEP student workshop and training surveys were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance and descriptive statistics. The Spring 2022 Faculty workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® satisfaction survey were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA and descriptive statistics.

## Findings

The findings included information from evidenced-based data (e.g., grades, General Education Student Learning Outcomes) and Likert-type survey tools from the student and educator perspectives. The grades provided hard data regarding whether oral, written, and digital communication skills were gained, and the surveys provided documentation regarding student and faculty perceptions about whether those skills were gained. The student learning objectives provided educators' perspectives regarding whether mastery of oral and written communication was achieved. The literature is clear that students need to feel that they have gained skills to put them into practice in the "real world" setting (Cavanagh et al., 2019; Sabti et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, the surveys provided a glimpse into students' self-efficacy regarding their communication skills.

Further, the surveys provided an overview of the educators' perspectives on the effectiveness of the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules and workshop training. The findings addressed whether implementing the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program significantly improved students' work readiness, specifically oral, written, and digital skills, in the community college setting. The findings for the analyses of the (a) Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 grades for QEP-dedicated courses, (b) Fall 2021 General Education Student Learning Outcomes Assessment outcomes, (c) Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 QEP student workshop and training surveys, and (d) Spring 2022 Faculty workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® satisfaction survey are presented in this section.

### *Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 Grades for QEP-dedicated Course Findings*

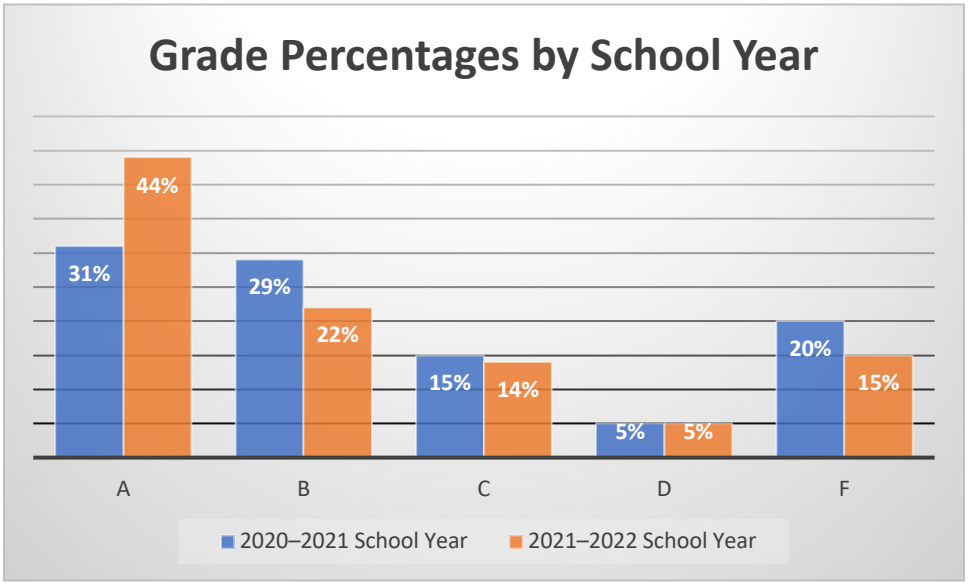
The QEP-dedicated courses are those courses aligned with Student Learning Outcome 1.1: Students will improve oral communication skills through enhanced instruction and academic support focused on speaking skills: conveying a clear main idea, tone, volume, pace, and eye contact, Student Learning Outcome 2.1: Students will improve written communication skills through enhanced instruction and academic support focused on: grammar and proofreading, clarity and organization, content and analysis, and research, and Student Learning Outcome 3.1: Students will increase understanding of netiquette for digital communication. The Conover© work readiness program is embedded within specific quality enhancement programs.

The Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 grades for QEP-dedicated courses were analyzed using an independent-samples *t* test and descriptive statistics. Data are mean ± standard deviation unless otherwise stated. The sample included 473 participants for the 2020–2021 school year and 355 participants for the 2021–2022 school year. A review of the descriptive statistics revealed that for the 2020–2021 school year, 75% of the students achieved a grade of A, B, or C and 25% of the students achieved a grade of D or F; and for the 2021–2022 school year, 80% of the students achieved a grade of A, B, or C; and 20% of the students achieved a grade of D or F (See Figure 2 for an overview of course grade percentages for the 2020-2021 and the 2021-2022

academic school years). An independent-samples *t* test was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean scores for the QEP-dedicated classes after Nunez college students' participation in the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules for the 2020–2021 and the 2021–2022 school years. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Grade scores for the 2019–2020 school year and the 2021–2022 school year were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$), and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by the Levene's test for equality of variances ($p = .198$). There was a statistically significant difference in the mean grade score for QEP courses between the 2021-2022 school year (95% CI, 2.77±1.50) and the 2020-2021 school year (95% CI, 2.46±.133), $t(826) = -3.080$, $p = .002$. There was a significant difference in the mean grades of students enrolled in QEP-dedicated classes after participation in the quality enhancement program at Nunez Community College. Figure 1 provides the achieved grade percentages by school year.

**Figure 1**

*Grade Percentages by School Year*




### *Fall 2021 The General Education Assessment Student Learning Outcome Findings*

The General Education Assessment Student Learning Outcome findings related to Student Learning Outcome 1: Students will demonstrate effective communication skills through oral, reading, written, and digital formats in a professional setting were presented in this section. The Fall 2021 General Education Assessment Student Learning Outcomes were analyzed using an independent-samples *t* test and descriptive statistics. The oral and written communication data were used so that comparisons could be made to the oral and written communication data provided in the first analysis. There was no digital data available. The reading data was not included in this analysis because it was not aligned with the research questions involving the examination of the improvement of students' oral, written, and digital communication skills. The General Education Assessment Student Learning Outcomes are evaluated based on a four-point rubric indicating the degree to which the learning outcomes were achieved. The possible

rubric scores for the General Education Assessment Student Learning Outcomes were 1-Benchmark, 2 – Milestone, 3 – Milestone, and 4 – Capstone. Typically, a score of 1 on a four-point rubric means that the student did not meet the learning objective, and there is little evidence they met the learning objective; a score of 2 indicates that the student is close to meeting the learning objective, demonstrating partial mastery of the learning objectives; a score of 3 indicates the student met the learning objective, demonstrating mastery of the learning objective; a score of 4 indicates the student met the learning objective, demonstrating mastery of the learning objective, and they were able to transfer the learning to other situations or settings.

The sample included a total of 858 students enrolled in courses related to Student Learning Outcome 1. The oral and written communication parts of Student Learning Objective Outcome 1 were examined. There were 145 students who were enrolled in courses that addressed the oral communication part of the learning outcome; those courses included SPCH 2150 (n = 50), BIOL 1500 (n = 75), and SOCI 2090 (n = 20). There were 713 students who were enrolled in courses that addressed the written communication part of the learning outcome; those courses included ENG 1000 (n = 130), HIST 1500 (n = 55), HIST 2010 (n = 160), HIST 2100 ( n=80), BIOL 2210 (n = 64), ECON 2000 (N = 94), and PHSC (n = 30).

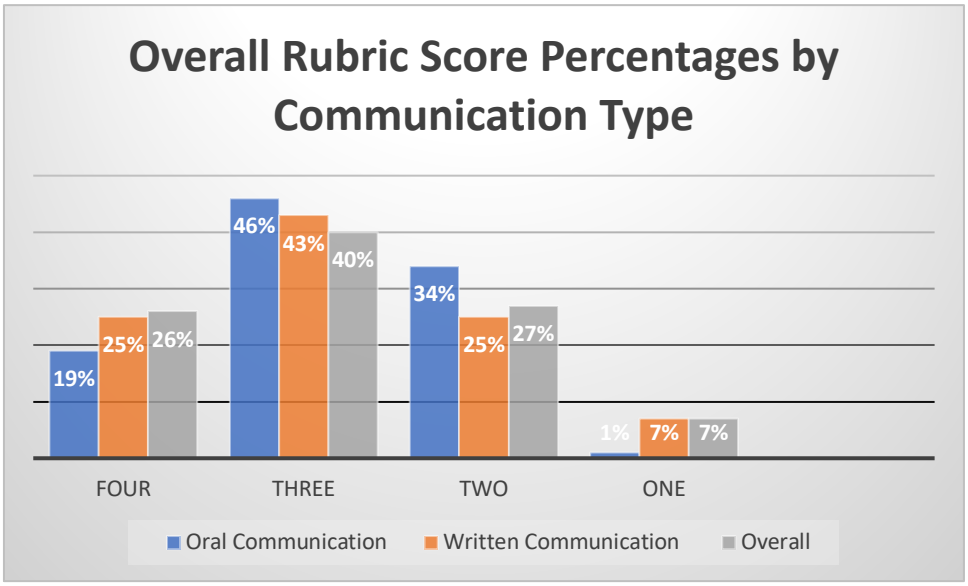
### *General Assessment Student Learning Outcome 1 Results*

Data are mean ± standard deviation unless otherwise stated. An independent-samples *t* test was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean rubric scores for the oral communication classes and the mean rubric scores for the written communication classes for Fall 2021. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Rubric scores for the oral communication courses and the written communication courses for Fall 2021 were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$), and there was no homogeneity of variances, as assessed by the Levene's test for equality of variances ($p < .05$). However, the independent-samples *t* test was run because it is robust when there are unequal variances. There was not a statistically significant difference in the mean rubric scores for the oral communication classes (95% CI, 2.84 ± .733) and the mean rubric scores for the written communication classes (95% CI, 2.85 ± 2.87), $t(856) = -.310$, $p = .757$ for Fall 2021. There was not a significant difference in the mean rubric scores of 145 students enrolled in the courses related to the oral communication part of Learning Objective 1 and the mean rubric scores for the 713 students enrolled in the courses related to the written communication part of Learning Objective 1.

Overall, 66% of the 858 students enrolled in courses related to the oral and written part of Learning Objective 1 achieved mastery at the Milestone 3 and Capstone 4 levels, indicating they met the learning objective and attained mastery of the learning objective; 27% of the students achieved the Milestone 2 level indicating they were close to meeting the learning objective and demonstrated partial mastery of the learning objective, and seven percent of the students were rated at the Benchmark 1 level indicating they did not meet the learning objective. Figure 2 provides the overall rubric score percentages by communication type.

**Figure 2**

*Overall Rubric Score Percentages by Communication Type*




### *2021 and 2022 QEP Student Workshop and Training Survey Findings*

The findings related to 2021 and 2022 QEP student workshop surveys that were based on Quality Enhancement Program Student Learning Outcome 1.1 – Oral Communication, Student Learning Outcome 2.1 – Written Communication Skills, and 3.1 – Digital Communication Skills are presented in this section. There were 56 students who attended the oral, written, and digital 2021 and 2022 workshops. The digital communication workshops had the most enrollees (n = 35), followed by written communication workshops (n = 16) and oral communication workshops (n = 5). A total of 14 workshops (e.g., four oral communication workshops, five written communication workshops, and five digital communication workshops) were analyzed.

A five-point Likert scale was used for the seven-item surveys that included the following descriptors, (a) *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neutral, disagree*, and *strongly disagree*, which were assigned the scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, respectively, or (b) *very useful, somewhat useful, neutral, less useful, not useful*, which were assigned the scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, or (c) *very likely, somewhat likely, neutral, less likely*, and *not likely*, which were assigned the scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 for the purposes of this analysis. For example, all the *strongly agree*, *very useful*, and *very likely* Likert-type descriptors were assigned a 5 score.

The surveys for the students' oral, written, and digital communication workshops, consisted of seven questions. For this study, Question 1a, Question1b, Question 2a, and Question 2b were specifically related to the usefulness of the (a) workshop content, (b) interactive component of the workshop and the likelihood of incorporating what they learned into their (a) time as a student interacting with Nunez faculty and staff and (b) work environment with future employers and colleagues were analyzed.

Data are mean ± standard deviation unless otherwise stated. A one-way ANOVA was performed to determine if there were significant differences in the mean Likert-type scores for the oral, written, and digital communication QEP-dedicated workshops and trainings conducted

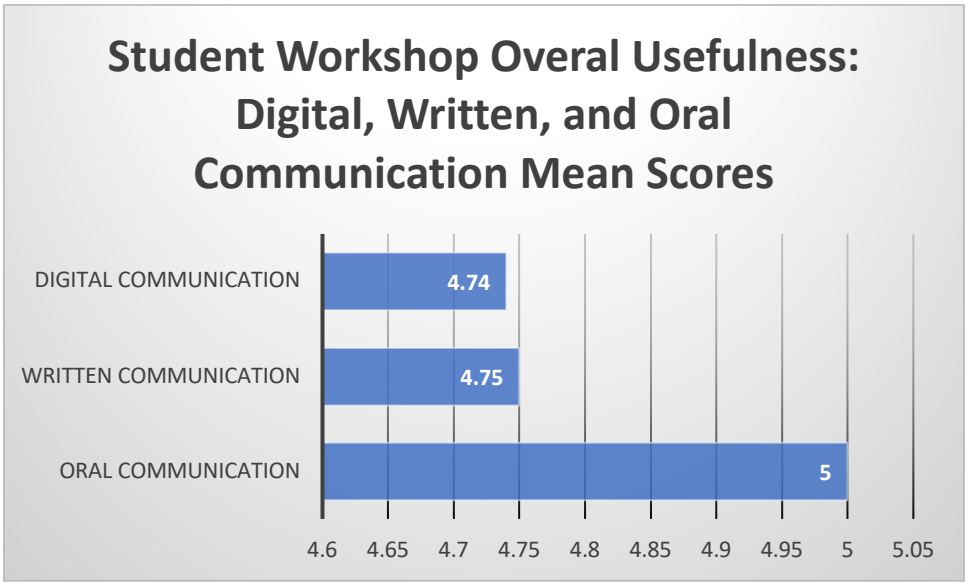
in 2021 and 2022. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Likert-type scores for the oral, written, and digital communication trainings and workshops were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$). There was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by the Levene's test for equality of variances ($p = .393$). There was not a statistically significant difference in the mean Likert-type scores for the oral (95% CI, 4.85±0.02), written (95% CI, 4.74±0.14), and digital communication (95% CI, 4.81±0.61) workshops and trainings as determined by the one-way ANOVA, $F(2, 216) = .937$, $p = .393$.

### *Descriptive Statistics Findings*

Students who attended the oral, written, and digital workshops indicated whether what they learned at the workshops was useful. Overall, the students found the oral communication workshops ($M = 5$) the most useful, followed by the written communication ($M = 4.75$) workshops and digital communication ($M = 4.74$). All of the oral, written, and digital workshops were rated *very useful* or *somewhat useful*. Figure 3 provides an overview of students' perceptions of the usefulness of the overall digital communication, written communication, and oral communication workshop content.

**Figure 3**

*Student Workshop Usefulness Digital Communication, Written Communication, and Oral Communication Mean Scores*



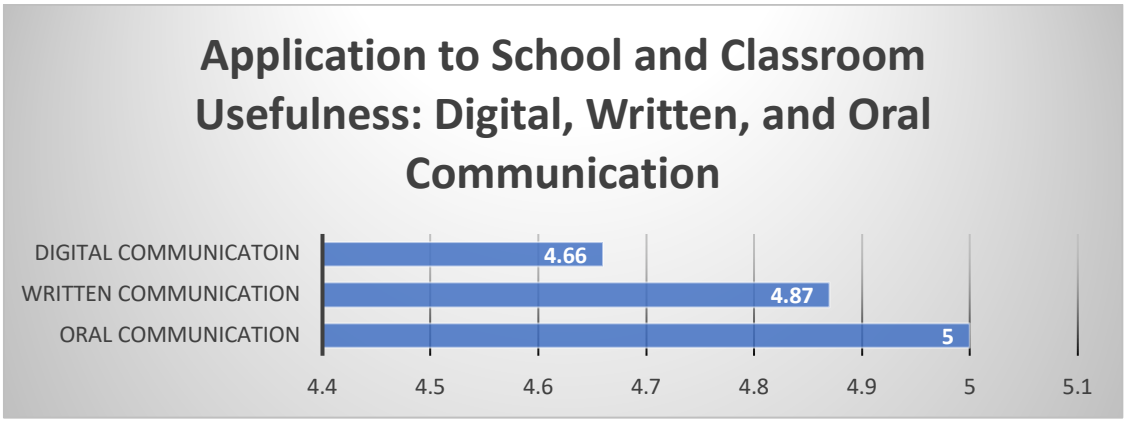

### *Application to School and Classroom Usefulness Findings*

The students rated the oral communication workshops' application to the school and classroom environments the most useful ($M = 5$), followed by the application of the written communication workshops ($M = 4.87$) and digital communication workshops ($M = 4.66$).
All of the oral, digital, and written workshops were rated at *very useful* or *somewhat useful* for application to the school and classroom environments. Figure 4 provides an overview of

students' perceptions of the usefulness of the digital, written, and oral communication workshops' application to the school and classroom environments.

**Figure 4**

*Application to School and Classroom Usefulness: Digital, Written, and Oral Communication Mean Scores*

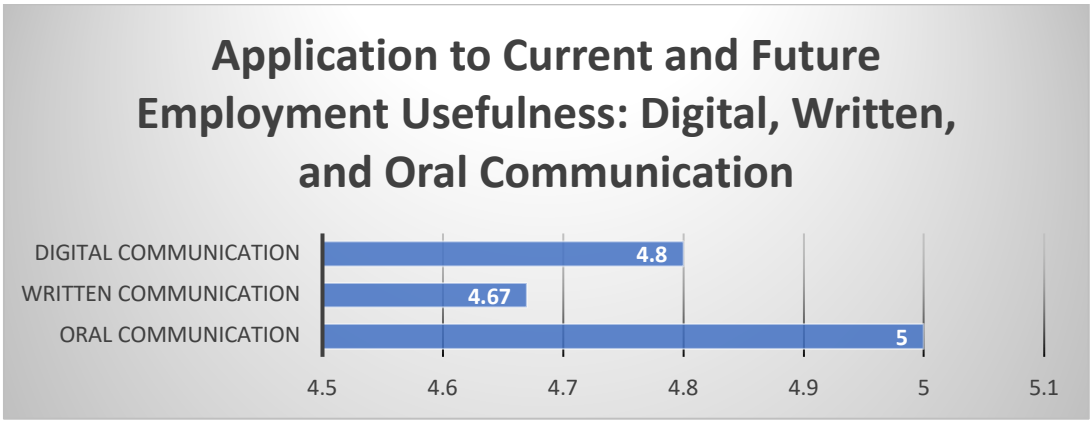



### *Application to Current and Future Employment Findings*

The students rated the oral communication workshops' application to current and future employment settings the most useful ($M = 5$), followed by the digital communication workshops ($M = 4.80$) and written communication workshops (M = 4.66). All of the oral, digital, and written workshops were rated at *very useful* or *somewhat useful* for application to current and future employment settings. Figure 7 provides an overview of students' perceptions of the usefulness of the digital, written, and oral communication workshops' application to their current and future employment settings.

**Figure 5**

*Application to Current and Future Employment Usefulness: Digital, Written, and Oral Communication Mean Scores*



### *The Spring 2022 Faculty Workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® Satisfaction Surveys Findings*

The findings for the Spring 2022 Faculty Workshop and Conover© Satisfaction surveys are presented in this section. The findings related to the 2021 and 2022 QEP student workshop surveys based on Quality Enhancement Program Student Learning Outcome 1.1 – Oral Communication, Learning Outcome 2.1 – Written Communication Skills, and Learning Outcome 3.1 – Digital Communication Skills were presented in this section. There were 14 educators who completed the Spring 2022 Faculty Workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® Satisfaction surveys.

The Spring 2022 Faculty Workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® Satisfaction Surveys were seven-item surveys. Question 1 and Question 2 consisted of eight sub-questions specifically related to the three Oral, Written, and Digital Learning Outcomes. Question 1 and Question 2 included eight sub-questions, including two questions dedicated to Learning Outcome 1.1, four questions related to Learning Outcome 2.1, and two questions related to Learning Outcome 3.1. The data from these 16 sub-questions were analyzed to determine the educators' perceptions regarding whether implementation of the QEP workshops and Conover Workplace Readiness® modules improved students' oral, written, and digital communication skills.

The sample included 14 educators who completed the 2022 QEP-dedicated workshop and the Conover Workplace Readiness® module satisfaction surveys. An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to compare educators' perceptions of the improvement in students' oral, written, and digital communication skills after participation in the QEP workshops and Conover Workplace Readiness® Modules. Further, comparative descriptive analyses was conducted to examine the mean Likert-type scores for oral, written, and digital communication individually, overall, and by QEP-dedicated workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® modules. Data are mean ± standard deviation unless otherwise stated. There were outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot; however, the independent-samples *t* test is robust for outliers. Likert-type scores for the Spring 2022 Faculty Workshop and Conover© Satisfaction Surveys were normally distributed as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test, ($p > .05$), and there was homogeneity of variances as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p = .362$). There was not a significant difference in the Likert-type scores for the QEP workshops (95% CI, 3.00±0.22) and the Conover© modules (95% CI, 2.8±0.14); $t(127) = 1.134$, $p = .259$. Educators did not feel there was a significant difference in the improvement of students' oral, written, and digital skills based on whether they participated in the QEP workshops or the Conover© modules.

### *Comparative Descriptive Statistics Findings for Question 1 and Question 2 Responses*

Educators were asked in Question 1 of the 2022 Satisfaction Survey if attending or viewing recorded QEP workshops improved students' oral, written, and digital communication skills. There were eight sub-questions related to Question 1. The possible responses to Question 1 were *great deal, some, neutral, very little*, and *not at all*, which were assigned the scores of 5,4,3,2, and 1, respectively, for this analysis. Educators were asked in Question 2 of the 2022 Satisfaction Survey how much the use of the Conover© modules in their class improved oral, written, and digital communication. There were eight sub-questions related to Question 2.
The possible responses to Question 1 and Question 2 were a *great deal, some, neutral, very little*, and *not at all*, which were assigned the scores of 5,4,3,2, and 1, respectively, for this analysis.

Overall, educators felt that student improved their oral communication skills the most for both the QEP workshops ($M = 3.15$) and the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules (3.21).

For the QEP-dedicated workshops, educators felt students improved their oral communication skills ($M = 3.15$) the most, followed by their written communication skills ($M = 2.94$) and oral communication skills ($M = 2.94$). For the Conover Workplace Readiness® Modules, educators felt that students improved their oral communication skills the most ($M = 3.21$), followed by their digital communication skills ($M = 2.80$) and written communication skills ($M = 2.57$).

### *QEP Training and Workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® Module Frequency Distribution of Likert-type Scores*

The responses to both Question 1 and Question 2 were assigned scores as follows for analysis purposes 5 - *great deal*, 4 - *some*, 3 - *neutral*, 2 - *very little*, and 1 - *not at all*. Both the QEP training and Workshop and the Conover Workplace Readiness® module samples reflected a normal distribution of the Likert-type scores. The Likert-type scores for QEP trainings and Workshops were more normally distributed than the Likert-type scores for the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules. The QEP Trainings and Workshops Likert-type scores represented a perfect normal distribution. Although the Conover Workplace Readiness® module reflected a normal distribution statistically as determined by the Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$), the scores were clustered around the median.

Educators felt that students attending or viewing the QEP-dedicated trainings and workshops improved their oral, written, and digital communication skills: Some (22%) or a Great deal (5.5%); however, the majority of the responses (72.5%) were rated Neutral (45%), Very Little (22%), and Not at all (5.5%). Educators felt that participation in the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules improved students' oral, verbal, and written communication skills a Great deal (0%) or Some (23%); however, the majority of educator responses (77%) were rated at Neutral (54%), Very Little (3%), and Not at all (20%). Overall, educators felt that less than 25% of the students improved their oral, verbal, and digital communication skills after participation in the QEP Trainings and Workshops or the Conover© Modules. Table 5 provides an overview of the QEP-dedicated Trainings and Workshops and Conover© Modules Score Percentages.

**Table 2**

*QEP-dedicated Trainings and Workshops and Conover© Modules Score Percentages*

| | 5 - Great deal | 4 Some | 3 Neutral | 2 Very little | 1 Not at all |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| QEP-dedicated Training and Workshops | 5.50% | 22.00% | 45.00% | 22.00% | 5.50% |
| Conover© Modules | 0% | 23.00% | 54.00% | 3.00% | 20.00% |

## Summary

An evidenced-based, multi-perspective, analytical approach was used to investigate whether students' oral, written, and digital skill sets were improved after participation in the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program coursework, which included embedded Conover Workplace Readiness® modules at Nunez Community College. Data were analyzed using the (a) grades for the Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 QEP-dedicated courses, (b) rubric scores from the

Fall 2021 General Education Student Learning Outcomes, (c) Likert-type scores from the Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 QEP student workshop and training surveys, and (d) Likert-type scores from the Spring 2022 Faculty workshop and Conover Workplace Readiness® module satisfaction survey. The grades and mastery level rubric scores provided a measure of students' achievement, whereas the Likert-type scores from the student training and workshop surveys provided their perspectives about whether they had attained oral, written, and digital communication skills and whether they would use those skills in the classroom or in current and future employment situations, and the Likert-type scores from the faculty satisfaction survey provided educators' perspectives about whether students had attained oral, written, and digital communication skills.

In summary, we presented the findings from QEP-dedicated class grades, student and teacher workshop surveys, and learning outcome assessments regarding whether participation in the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program and the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules improved students' work readiness in the community college setting. Findings showed significant improvement in students' oral, communication, and digital skills after the implementation of the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program at Nunez Community College. All of the students felt they would be able to use the oral, written, and digital skills gained in QEP-dedicated QEP workshops and trainings in the classroom and in current and future employment setting. Although, educators felt that less than 25% of the students improved their oral, verbal, and digital communication skills after participation in the QEP trainings and workshops or the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules.

Educators felt that students still struggled to show professionalism in their written communication. Further, educators felt the strengths of the QEP were that it was implemented across the curriculum with a variety of topics and expert presenters. However, educators felt that there was a need to improve student attendance at QEP workshops; attendance should be mandatory, a variety of workshop times and dates should be offered, and students who do not perform well should repeat the courses or the Conover Workplace Readiness® modules.

Student comments indicated that they felt many parts of the QEP-dedicated oral, written, and digital workshop were important, stressing the ability to communicate effectively in a professional manner, learning how to appropriately interact with others, and learning how to research and cite sources appropriately, using proper grammar. The students felt the least important parts of the QEP-dedicated oral, written, and digital communication workshops included some of the technical difficulties they had that prevented them from being able to hear and see a few of the online workshops. Some of the social media apps reviewed in the workshops were not important to the students.

There was a gap between students' and educators' perceptions about students' mastery of oral, written, and digital communication skills after participation in the QEP-dedicated courses and Conover Workplace Readiness® modules. However, the evidence (e.g., grades, mastery of learning outcomes) showed significant improvement in students' oral, communication, written, and digital skills after participation in Geaux Pro quality enhancement courses, workshops, and Conover Workplace Readiness® modules, resulting in improved employability skills.

## Discussion

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges is the organization responsible for accreditation for higher education in Louisiana and nine other southern states (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2018). Since 2004 the SACSCC has required colleges to develop a quality enhancement plan along with a five-year

implementation plan, identifying a specific area of improvement to improve student academic outcomes (SACSCC, 2018). Therefore, Nunez Community College implemented the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program with a focus on improving students' professional communication skills (e.g., oral skills, written skills, digital skills), resulting in an improvement in their work readiness and employability. The goal of this study was to investigate whether students' oral, written, and digital skill sets were improved after participation in the quality enhancement program coursework, which included embedded online Conover Workplace Readiness® modules at Nunez Community College.

Nunez Community College designed an evidence-based, multi-perspective approach to examine whether students' oral, written, and digital communication skill sets were improved. The 2020–2021 school year was the first year that the Geaux Pro quality enhancement program was implemented. Assessment from grades and mastery levels provided hard evidence that the Nunez community college students improved their professional communication skills (e.g., oral, written, digital). Student feedback indicated that they found their newly acquired communication skills useful in the classroom and for future employment. There was a marked gap between educators' perceptions of students' attainment of professional communication skills and the evidence from grades, learning objective outcomes, and student feedback.

## Implications For Educational Practice in Community Colleges and Future Directions

This study has implications for higher education institutions considering implementing quality enhancement programs. Specifically, the findings showed that soft skills or work readiness could be improved through the use of an online work readiness program, such as Conover Workplace Readiness® modules, which have been successfully utilized with numerous populations and settings, including high school students, workplace settings, and higher education (Conover, 2015); however, embedding the modules into the coursework is a unique and innovative concept. Recommendations for future higher education practice would be to address students' soft skill deficits by embedding online soft skill programs such as Conover Workplace Readiness® modules into the curriculum.

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