

# Curricular Career Readiness at The University of Southern Mississippi

A comprehensive analysis of how USM prepares students for workplace success through embedded competencies, departmental initiatives, and industry partnerships.

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# Presentation Overview



## Career Readiness Framework

Introduction to NACE competencies and their relevance to workforce preparation



## USM Departmental Initiatives

Examination of career readiness efforts across academic units



## Assessment & Feedback

Methods for measuring effectiveness and gathering stakeholder input



## Bridging Perception Gaps

Addressing discrepancies between student and employer perspectives



## Best Practices & Recommendations

Strategies for enhancing career readiness across the institution

# What is Career Readiness?

"The attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace."

- National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), 2024

Career readiness transcends academic disciplines and represents essential skills and behaviors expected by employers across industries. These competencies form the foundation for success in any professional setting.



# Why Career Readiness Matters



## Evolving Economic Landscape

Today's rapidly changing economy and technological environment demand adaptable graduates with both technical knowledge and applied skills.



## Employer Expectations

Employers consistently report gaps between the competencies they expect from new graduates and the preparedness levels they observe upon hiring.

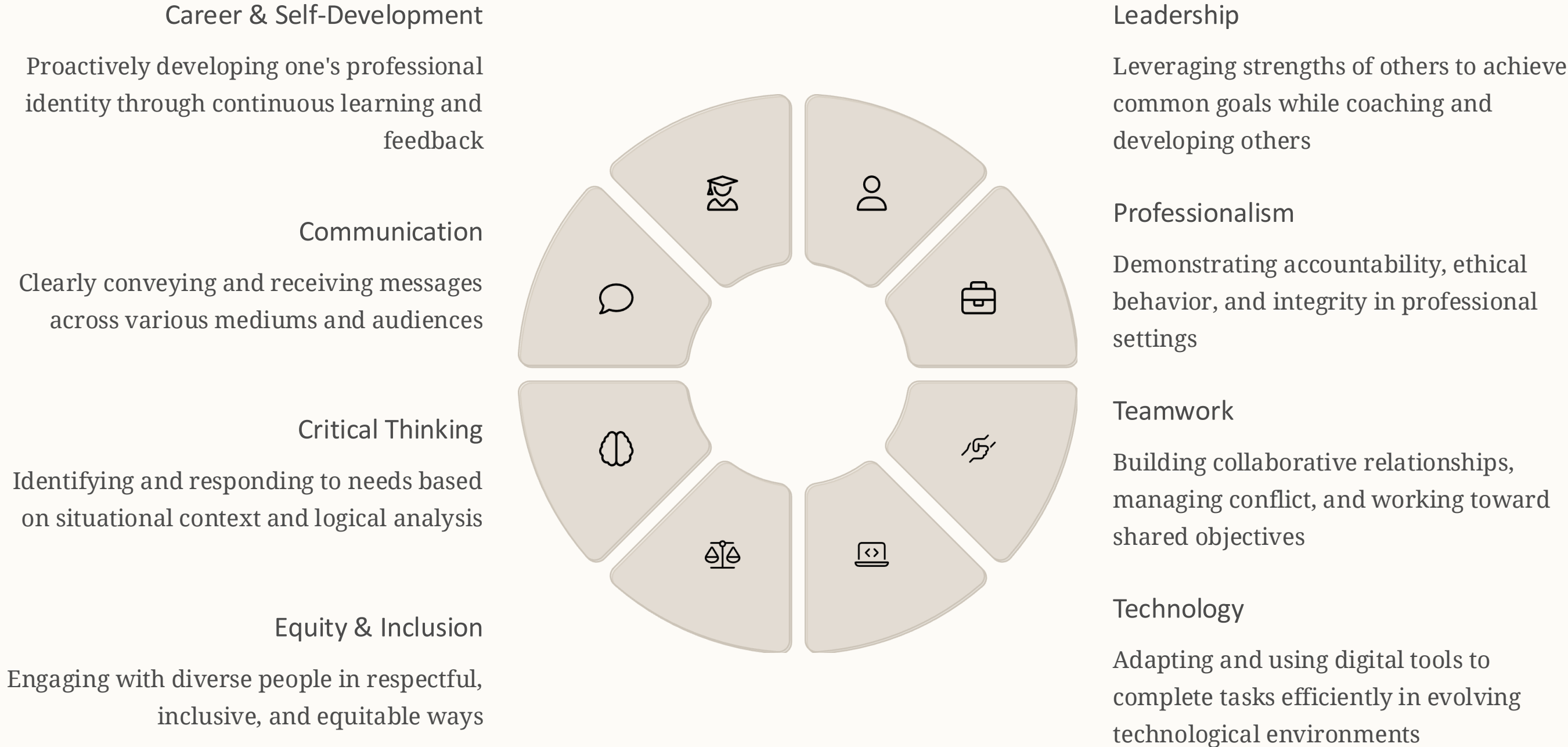


## Institutional Responsibility

Higher education institutions are increasingly called upon to ensure students graduate with both discipline-specific knowledge and broadly applicable professional skills.



# NACE Career Readiness Competencies



# Career & Self-Development

## Definition

Proactively developing one's professional identity and continuously improving through feedback and learning.

## Key Elements

- Setting personal and professional goals
- Seeking mentorship and guidance
- Maintaining awareness of industry trends
- Pursuing continuous learning opportunities

## USM Implementation Examples

- Career fairs and networking events
- One-on-one career coaching
- Embedded career modules in specific courses
- Professional development workshops
- Alumni mentorship programs



# Communication & Critical Thinking

## Communication

Effectively conveying and receiving messages across various mediums and audiences.

- Speaking-Intensive and Writing-Intensive requirements in General Education
- Oral presentations and report writing across disciplines
- Visual communication training in design fields

## Critical Thinking

Identifying and responding to needs based on situational context and logical analysis.

- Case studies and problem-based learning
- Research projects requiring data interpretation
- Group discussions and debates
- Capstone projects with real-world applications

# Equity & Inclusion and Leadership



## Equity & Inclusion

USM fosters this competency through targeted general education courses on diversity, university-wide initiatives like the Multicultural Center, and over 20 cultural student organizations that actively promote cross-cultural dialogue, inclusive environments, and meaningful engagement with diverse perspectives.



## Leadership

Students cultivate essential leadership capabilities through structured opportunities including the Southern Miss Leadership Academy, positions within the Student Government Association, collaborative capstone projects, mentored service-learning experiences, and leadership roles in over 200 academic and professional organizations across campus.



# Professionalism, Teamwork & Technology



## Professionalism

Many departments integrate professionalism modules into their curriculum, particularly in capstone courses and internships, focusing on accountability, ethical behavior, and workplace conduct.



## Teamwork

Interdisciplinary projects, lab partnerships, and group presentations are common across USM programs, preparing students for collaborative professional environments and conflict resolution.



## Technology

USM supports technology competency through tech-integrated coursework, training sessions, and department-specific software instruction, such as CAD in Construction and Design, Python in Computing Sciences, and MuseScore in Music.



## Departmental Initiative Initiative Highlights



# School of Accountancy Initiatives



## Professional Development Course

ACC 311 features guest speakers from diverse sectors who introduce students to various career paths in accounting.



## Technical Certification

All students must earn Excel certification as part of ACC 312, ensuring industry-relevant technical proficiency.



## Data Analytics Focus

Multiple courses incorporate real-world data sets and emphasize analytics tools like Tableau used in the profession.



## Industry Advisory Board

A board of accounting professionals meets twice annually to provide insights on industry needs and inform curriculum updates.

# AFROTC / Aerospace Studies Approach

## Structured Career Pathway

Students progress through a leadership-focused curriculum that integrates ethical development, national security education, and technical training.

## Defined Learning Outcomes

- **Leader of Character:** Ethical leadership and decision-making
- **Warfighter:** Understanding of Air Force doctrine and military concepts
- **Effective Communicator:** Clear, audience-specific communication
- **Strategic Minded Officer:** Knowledge of global security issues
- **Disciplined Professional:** Commitment to standards and excellence

## Elite Internship Opportunities

- National Security Agency Summer Internship
- Air Force Institute of Technology Cyber Education
- Virtual Institutes of Cyber Research
- Air Force Cyber Security Camp
- Air Force Research Lab Advanced Course



# School of Construction and Design

## Industry-Connected Learning

The School demonstrates a robust approach to career readiness through experiential learning, strong industry partnerships, and opportunities for professional recognition.

### Key Initiatives

- Construction and Design Career Fair
- Experiential Learning elective with community projects
- ABC Construction Management Competition
- Ready for Life Industry Partnership Program (launching soon)

## Industry Engagement Opportunities

- Guest speaker events
- Field trips and site visits
- Job shadowing experiences
- Industry mentorship programs
- Support for student competition teams
- Co-op placements and internships



# School of Health Professions

## Workforce & Graduate Program Alignment

All academic programming is intentionally structured to prepare students for immediate employment in healthcare or for admission into graduate and professional healthcare programs.

## Accreditation-Driven Preparation

Career readiness components are explicitly required by the School's accrediting body, ensuring that program design remains focused on outcomes and industry expectations.

## Pre-Professional Advising

The School works closely with university pre-professional advisors to provide tailored guidance for students planning to pursue advanced degrees in healthcare fields.

## Practical Certification

The School offers CPR and First Aid certification courses, providing essential skills often required for clinical placements and healthcare employment.



# School of Management Approach

## Foundational Career Preparation

All undergraduate students complete MGT 300: Management of Organizations, which introduces core concepts in management, leadership, ethics, goal setting, social responsibility, and decision-making.

## Specialized Skill Development

- Entrepreneurship students access the Hatchery (Center for Entrepreneurship)
- Human Resource Management offers internship-based learning
- International Business requires foreign language and study abroad

## Capstone Assessment

MGT 400: Global Management Policy and Strategy serves as a capstone course focused on:

- Integration of functional knowledge
- Strategic analysis and decision-making
- Global environment awareness
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Ethical reasoning in business leadership



# School of Marketing Initiatives



## Career Exploration

Students explore industries through applied projects, internships, and partnerships with alumni and professionals, including "Lunch with an Entrepreneur" and the Tri-Star Marketing Student Development Program.



## Technical Skills

The curriculum cultivates critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital fluency in software, data analysis, and emerging technologies aligned with current job market demands.



## Industry Alignment

Faculty consult regularly with business professionals and alumni to ensure course content reflects industry needs through guest lectures, workshops, and collaborative projects.



## Soft Skills Development

The curriculum supports communication, leadership, and teamwork skills through client projects, service-learning experiences, and structured opportunities to practice professional etiquette.



# Ocean Science and Engineering



## Discipline-Specific Skills

Courses develop technical competencies in programming, engineering principles, instrumentation, statistics, data analysis, and professional communication.



## Entrepreneurship Pathway

Students can complete a B.S. and MBA in five years while developing skills in innovation, entrepreneurship, and technical leadership for the blue economy.



## Industry Collaboration

Programs maintain deep industry connections through site visits, curriculum input from professionals, and an Industry Advisory Board that shapes offerings.

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## Capstone Experience

All majors require a capstone project simulating professional scenarios and requiring communication, leadership, and decision-making under realistic constraints.

# Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms



# The Perception Gap Challenge

## Understanding the Discrepancy

A significant gap often exists between how students perceive their career readiness and how employers evaluate that readiness. According to NACE surveys, students typically rate themselves as proficient in most competencies, while employers frequently assess new graduates as lacking in several key areas.

## Contributing Factors

- Limited authentic practice opportunities
- Over-reliance on academic achievement as an employability indicator
- Unclear understanding of competencies in practice



The perception gap reflects real differences in expectations and preparation. Students may feel confident based on classroom success, while employers assess readiness on job performance metrics like initiative, teamwork, and adaptability.



# USM's Response to the Perception Gap



## Curriculum Integration

Faculty are encouraged to articulate how course objectives relate to workplace skills and to make those connections explicit in assessments and feedback.



## Experiential Learning Expansion

Real-world experience through internships and practicums provides students with practical exposure to workplace expectations and a frame of reference for self-evaluation.



## Reflection and Metacognition

Courses across disciplines integrate reflective assignments asking students to evaluate their growth in each NACE competency and identify areas for improvement.



## Employer Engagement

Advisory boards and employer panels help ensure that program outcomes remain aligned with current workforce needs and expectations.

# Improving Student Communication of Skills

## Articulation Challenges

Many students struggle to effectively communicate their skills in professional settings, contributing to the perception gap. USM has introduced several tools to address this challenge:

- Competency-based resumes and cover letters
- Mock interviews and elevator pitch coaching
- Digital portfolios and LinkedIn integration

## Benefits of Improved Communication

When students can effectively articulate their competencies:

- Employers better recognize student qualifications
- Students gain confidence in professional interactions
- The perception gap narrows between academic and workplace expectations





# Best Practices at USM



## Curriculum Integration

Several academic units explicitly integrate NACE competencies into learning outcomes, syllabi, and assessment rubrics, making career preparation visible and measurable.



## Employer Engagement

USM involves employers not only in hiring events but also in providing feedback on curriculum design, ensuring alignment with workforce needs.



## Experiential Learning

Widespread use of internships, co-ops, practicums, clinical placements, and service-learning projects offers students real-world contexts to apply their skills.



## Coordinated Support

Career Services and academic advisors work together to offer a scaffolded approach to career planning throughout the student journey.



# Recommendations for Enhancement



## University-Wide Framework

Establish a centralized framework mapping NACE competencies to academic milestones, providing shared language while preserving program identity.



## Faculty Development

Provide professional development for faculty on incorporating career competencies and recognize contributions through awards or innovation grants.



## Digital Portfolio Initiative

Implement competency-based ePortfolios tracking evidence of growth in each NACE domain, serving as capstone experiences and employer engagement tools.



## Enhanced Data Collection

Develop a university dashboard tracking competency growth, internship participation, and outcomes to guide program improvements.

# Expected Outcomes

## Student Outcomes

- Increased confidence in career-related competencies
- Improved ability to articulate skills to employers
- Higher rates of employment and graduate school placement
- Greater satisfaction with career preparation

## Institutional Outcomes

- Stronger employer partnerships
- Enhanced reputation for graduate preparedness
- Improved retention and completion rates
- More cohesive approach to career development

## Employer Outcomes

- Better alignment between expectations and graduate skills
- Reduced onboarding and training time
- Increased satisfaction with USM graduates
- Deeper engagement with university programs





# Conclusion: Building a Culture of Career Readiness



## Shared Responsibility

Career readiness is not solely the domain of career services or individual departments—it requires coordinated effort across the institution, with faculty, staff, employers, and students all playing vital roles.



## Continuous Improvement

As workforce demands evolve, USM must maintain a dynamic approach to career preparation, regularly assessing outcomes and refining strategies to meet emerging needs.



## Student-Centered Focus

Ultimately, career readiness initiatives must serve the diverse needs and aspirations of USM students, equipping them with both the competencies and the confidence to thrive in their chosen fields.