

Executive Summary

Provost Faculty Fellow Report – Curricular Career Readiness at The University of Southern Mississippi

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Overview

This report provides a comprehensive review of career readiness initiatives across The University of Southern Mississippi (USM), benchmarked against the *National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)* Career Readiness Competencies. These competencies—communication, critical thinking, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, technology, equity and inclusion, and career and self-development—form the foundation of employer expectations and serve as the framework for assessing USM’s institutional alignment with national standards.

Purpose and Methodology

Data were collected in early 2025 through outreach to school directors and program leaders, supplemented by document review and follow-up communications. The goal was to document unit-level efforts that promote career readiness within curricula, evaluate how these efforts align with the NACE competencies, and propose strategies for institutional enhancement.

Key Findings

1. Career Readiness Integration

Many USM academic units explicitly embed NACE competencies into coursework, experiential learning, and co-curricular programs. Faculty across disciplines are linking classroom learning to professional outcomes through practical application, reflection, and industry engagement.

2. Exemplary Unit Initiatives

- **School of Accountancy** – Industry-informed curriculum, Excel certification, and advisory board input ensure technical and professional competence.
- **Aerospace Studies (AFROTC)** – Leadership-based, outcome-driven training directly aligned with Air and Space Force readiness standards.
- **Computing Sciences & Computer Engineering** – Capstone projects, internships, and ethics integration foster both technical proficiency and professional skills.
- **Construction & Design** – Industry partnerships, competitions, and micro-credentialing initiatives connect learning with workforce application.

- **Health Professions** – Accreditation-driven curricula and pre-professional advising ensure healthcare-specific readiness.
- **Management & Marketing** – Experiential projects, internships, and digital literacy training build leadership, innovation, and communication skills.
- **Music** – Balanced focus on performance, pedagogy, and research prepares students for diverse professional pathways.
- **Ocean Science & Engineering** – Technical, entrepreneurial, and industry-collaborative initiatives cultivate readiness for the “blue economy.”
- **Psychology** – Career planning, transferable skills training, and undergraduate research foster adaptability and graduate success.

3. Assessment and Feedback

USM employs rubric-based assessments, internship evaluations, and employer surveys to measure competency growth. The *NACE Career Readiness Assessment Tool* has been piloted to help students self-evaluate progress. Feedback from employers and alumni informs curriculum revisions and identifies emerging workforce needs.

4. The Perception Gap

A key challenge nationally and at USM is the disconnect between student self-assessment and employer evaluations. Employers often perceive deficits in communication, professionalism, and critical thinking. USM’s response includes embedding NACE competencies in syllabi, expanding internships, integrating reflective learning, and strengthening employer engagement.

Best Practices Identified

- Curriculum integration of NACE competencies
- Experiential and service learning across programs
- Employer and alumni engagement in curriculum design
- Coordinated support from Career Services and academic advising
- Institution-wide emphasis on data-informed continuous improvement

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Establish a University-Wide Career Readiness Framework** mapping competencies to curricular and co-curricular milestones.
2. **Expand Faculty Development** to support competency-based teaching and assessment.
3. **Implement a Digital ePortfolio Initiative** for documenting and demonstrating NACE-aligned growth.
4. **Develop a Career Readiness Data Dashboard** to track longitudinal progress and outcomes.

5. **Advance Equity in Career Access** through targeted support for underrepresented students.
 6. **Institutionalize Employer Feedback Loops** to refine curriculum design.
 7. **Integrate Career Readiness into General Education** to start competency development early in the student experience.
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Conclusion

USM demonstrates significant progress in embedding career readiness across its academic ecosystem. By adopting a unified institutional framework, expanding data and assessment infrastructure, and deepening collaboration between faculty, Career Services, and employers, USM can further elevate its standing as a national leader in preparing graduates for meaningful, adaptable, and successful careers.