

## **Soft skills are an invaluable 'counterpart to STEM.' Here's how a USC program is equipping teens**

Center for Third Space Thinking founder Ernest Wilson says there are five competencies K-12 students "desperately need" to succeed in a tech-focused world.

By Linda Jacobson

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Adaptability is a competitive advantage, Chris Swain, a product designer, entrepreneur and lecturer at the University of Southern California, tells the young men and women gathered for his presentation.

"How often are we not getting what we want out of the world?" he asks them.

"Every single day."

But students' ability to show those they hope to impress that they can deal with setbacks and keep working toward their goals will make them stand out, he added.

Swain, who founded the Electronic Arts Game Innovation Lab at USC in Los Angeles, gives this talk to executives from companies such as IBM, Google and United Airlines as part of the leadership training delivered by the university's Center for Third Space Thinking. Founded in 2017 by Ernest Wilson, former dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at USC, the center teaches the "soft skills" corporations say they are looking for in employees.

But one afternoon last month, his audience was made up of juniors and seniors from the Merced Union High School District interested in filmmaking and media. They live in California's San Joaquin Valley, a region known for its agriculture industry — not news and entertainment.

"We're always like, 'It would be so great to go to [Los Angeles] and get the vibe of what it's like to be with other filmmakers,'" said Oscar Perez, a senior at Atwater High School in Atwater, California, who recently entered his short film "Insular Counselor" into a SkillsUSA competition.

But Perez, whose parents both work in the agriculture industry, also understands collaboration and patience are important in the career he wants to pursue. "If you can't work with other people," he said, "don't work in film."

As part of their exposure to digital storytelling and photography, the students are also learning about the skills the center has identified will help them be successful in their careers. In addition to adaptability, there's cultural competency, empathy, intellectual curiosity and 360-degree thinking — understanding multiple perspectives. The center calls these the "counterpart to STEM."

"I was doing research to find out what my students need to know," said Wilson, now a professor of communication and political science. "I talked to people who are going to employ them. I came to realize that this is hugely needed work."

Taking his cellphone out of his pocket and holding it in front of his face, he said, "the more time you do this" is linked with anxiety and depression in young people. "Our kids desperately need soft skills."

Such skills are a leading topic in business publications, and a study conducted by researchers at MIT Sloan School of Management showed that providing training to employees on areas such as communication, problem solving, and decision-making improved productivity.

In addition, an analysis of 142,000 job descriptions released in January shows that oral and written communication, collaboration and problem-solving are the most highly requested 21st century skills in the workplace. Others appearing in the review included social intelligence and self-direction.

Other examples of curriculum at the K-12 level include Project Lead the Way, a STEM curriculum and professional development program that also emphasizes "transportable" skills, and a Georgia Department of Labor program that teaches and rewards students for attributes such as punctuality, teamwork and communication.

## THOSE 'INVALUABLE' SOFT SKILLS

Directions: Read the article, "Soft Skills are an 'Invaluable Counterpart' to STEM." Unscramble the soft skills listed below, based directly on the skills mentioned in the article. Once all of the words are unscrambled, copy the letters from the numbered blanks to the number cells at the bottom of the page.

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7

LAARILBOCNOTO \_\_\_\_\_  
9

TIPCEANE \_\_\_\_\_  
11

RUTLLUAC TPOCNYCMEE \_\_\_\_\_  
12

PYETHMA \_\_\_\_\_  
13

CATELNULITLE SOTIIRYUC \_\_\_\_\_  
16 1

REEGED NINKIGTH 360- \_\_\_\_\_  
19 6

NIUNAMCIMTOOC \_\_\_\_\_  
18 2

LPBOMRE-VIOGLNS \_\_\_\_\_  
5

LOSCAI NITNICGELLE \_\_\_\_\_  
10 8 17

LESF-IEITORCDN \_\_\_\_\_  
15 14 3

LYTTUPCINAU \_\_\_\_\_  
4

1	2	3	4

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