

Power Skills Results, Fall 2024 First2 Students

White Paper for the First2 Network

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Numerous surveys of STEM and other employers over recent years have emphasized the need for employees to possess “soft skills”-- teamwork, collaboration, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, persistence and leadership to name a few. And although higher education academic advisors perceive that they are producing skilled graduates for the job market, employers report nationally and here in West Virginia, that college grads do not have the soft skills needed for the workplace. There are calls in the literature for greater opportunities for students to practice these skills often throughout their college going years, building competencies, rather than to wait for the skills to magically develop in the workplace [1].

The West Virginia Jobs Network, led by High Rocks Educational Corporation (a First2 anchor organization) developed a soft skills course to address this gap and it is geared for young job seekers and undergraduate students. First2 students participated in a section of this course in 2024, and this white paper describes the course and evaluation results from those students.

The Power Skills Course

Power Skills, a certification program provided by First2’s partner, the WV Jobs Network, is a set of courses that combines professional development on soft skills and leadership skills that employers and organizations in West Virginia have asked for. There are 3 levels of the course with certifications for each level.

Course 1

- Initiative
- Time Management
- Adaptability & Flexibility
- Focus & Productivity
- Workplace Communication

Course 2

- Customer Focus
- Project Management
- Critical Thinking & Problem Solving
- Leadership

Course 3

- Public Speaking & Advocacy
- Networking
- Emotional Intelligence
- Citizenship & Community
- Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Power Skills allow participants to demonstrate mastery of ‘next-level’ professional skills that will help them both as current students and future job-seekers. After completing each level of the program, they receive a digital certification badge that is independently verifiable by employers and that can be used as

a credential on resumes, social media profiles, and email signatures.

In September, 2024, First2 Student Directors and Assistant Directors were introduced to the Power Skills program as part of their on-boarding [2]. Student Directors were required to complete Course 1 as part of their service hours and Assistant Directors were invited but not required to participate.

In total, 14 First2 students completed Level 1 of the program. Level 1 includes Power Skills modules on Initiative, Time Management and Prioritization, Adaptability and Flexibility, Focus and Productivity, and Communication. Students asynchronously accessed each module, completed a journal prompt and the following week, participated in a weekly synchronous discussion led by a Power Skills coach. The course was offered to Americorps Members and other job trainees as well, creating simultaneous cohorts which gave students a choice as to which meeting to join. The Brightspace learning management system was used to host the course.

Table 1: Course Requirements

Timeline	Expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● One week for each module● Online learning modules● One-hour virtual group discussion (zoom)● Reflection Journal assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Average Time Commitment of 2-3 hours a week● Engagement with learning modules at your own pace● Virtual real-time discussion with cohort and coach● Completion of a weekly assignment

At the conclusion of the course, participants completed a course evaluation, and a reflective self-efficacy assessment to ascertain the self-reported proficiencies with the power skills after the course compared to before the course. The survey contained 74 statements grouped into five categories:

- Initiative
- Time management and prioritization
- Adaptability and Flexibility
- Focus and Productivity
- Workplace Communication

Results and Discussion:

Twenty-eight participants (First2 students and other participants) completed an evaluation of the Power Skills course. Of these, 79% of respondents thought the program was a somewhat good (18%) or good use (61%) of their time. Twenty-seven of twenty-eight participants would recommend the program to someone else. There were a few comments attached to this question. Two suggested offering the course to younger students. When asked which sections were the most valuable, respondents favored sections on Focus and Productivity and Time Management (20 responses each). The section on Flexibility and Adaptability was chosen least often (10 responses). Participants also completed a likert-style question in which they indicated level of agreement with the following statements:

- helped me think in a new way
- taught me new skills
- challenged me

- made me feel more confident
- made me a better leader
- connected me with new friends
- strengthened my relationship with caring adults
- will help me do better in school
- made learning fun

Responses favored “agree” or “strongly agree” for all statements except for “made learning fun” which had a more even spread of ratings from strongly agree to neutral.



For the self-efficacy survey, we conducted a one-tailed t-test (N=14) across all items (Table 2).

Self-reported “before-after” gains in self-efficacy were significant across all statements in all categories at the $P=0.05$ level, or better. The largest before-after changes were noted in “Initiative– pursuing work with drive and a strong accomplishment orientation”, and “Time Management & Prioritization–keeping a calendar of professional and personal responsibilities.” Smaller gains were noted in several statements, but in most cases, the “Before” scores were high (3 or above). In one statement “Adaptability & Flexibility– Take action when needed without having all the necessary facts in hand” the gain was small and the before and after scores were on the low side. This could be due to the wording of the statement.

Overall, these results strongly suggest that students increase their skill level and self-efficacy through the course. Evaluation results and comments indicate that the Power Skills Course is valuable to students while still in college. As more students take the course, and the sample size increases we will be able to categorize the data by different demographic characteristics such as year in school. It would be interesting to learn in a followup assessment if students find the skills useful in different realms, for example in internships and in their course work.

Table 2: Results from self-efficacy assessment.


Statement- Participants select "Not at All"(1), "Somewhat" (2), "Mostly" (3), "100%" (4), or " Can teach to others"(5)	Before Mean	After Mean	P (t-test)
Initiative Statements			
Pursue work with drive and a strong accomplishment orientation.	3.07	4.14	0.000
Continue to complete a task, despite difficult conditions, tight timelines, obstacles, or setbacks.	3.21	3.86	0.003
Go beyond the routine demands of the job to increase its variety and scope.	3.07	3.57	0.006
Provide suggestions and/or take actions that result in improved work processes, communications, or task performance.	2.93	3.86	0.000
Take initiative to seek out new work challenges, influence events, or take action.	3.21	3.86	0.003
Establish and maintain personally challenging but realistic work goals.	3.07	3.79	0.000
Bring issues to closure by pushing forward until a resolution is achieved.	2.71	3.50	0.001
Develop your own ways of working effectively and efficiently.	3.21	4.07	0.000
Perform effectively even with minimal direction, support, or approval.	2.86	3.79	0.000
Take responsibility for completing one's own work assignments.	3.93	4.43	0.002
Strive to exceed standards and expectations.	3.50	4.00	0.006
Exhibit confidence in capabilities and an expectation to succeed in future activities.	3.36	3.86	0.024
Time Management & Prioritization Statements			
Identify 3-5 top priorities each week; Make progress or complete these priorities.	3.07	3.79	0.000
Check in with your team or supervisor to ensure your priorities are in line with organizational priorities and needs.	3.50	4.00	0.002

Perform tasks correctly, quickly, and efficiently according to their relative urgency and importance (remember to use the Covey system to prioritize urgency and importance).	3.57	4.21	0.003
Keep a calendar of professional and personal responsibilities. Block time on your calendar to complete tasks.	3.00	4.07	0.000
Work to accomplish tasks before deadlines; does not wait until the last minute to complete assignments.	2.93	3.64	0.003
Know what and where your supplies and resources are so that you can access them efficiently.	3.64	4.29	0.001
Do not spend time on personal social media or personal projects during work time.	3.14	3.57	0.014
While social conversations in the workplace are important to keeping the team strong, limit small talk to stay focused on work tasks.	3.50	4.07	0.003
Avoid multi-tasking.	2.36	3.00	0.000
Limit distractions.	2.86	3.50	0.001
Take appropriate breaks to stay focused and refreshed.	3.43	4.14	0.003
Approach work in a methodical manner.	3.43	4.00	0.003
Plan and schedule tasks so that work is completed on time.	3.14	3.79	0.007
Keep track of details to ensure work is performed accurately and completely.	3.21	3.93	0.001
Anticipate obstacles to project completion and develop contingency plans to address them.	3.00	3.57	0.007
Find new ways of organizing work area or planning work to accomplish work more efficiently.	3.14	3.86	0.000
Adaptability & Flexibility Statements			
Is open to considering new ways of doing things.	3.64	4.14	0.002
Actively seek out and carefully consider the merits of new approaches to work.	3.07	3.79	0.001
Embrace new approaches when appropriate and discard approaches that are no longer working.	3.50	4.07	0.003
Take action when needed without having all the necessary	3.00	3.29	0.082

facts in hand.			
Easily adapt plans, goals, actions, or priorities in response to unpredictable or unexpected events, pressures, situations, and job demands.	3.36	3.86	0.006
Effortlessly shift gears and change direction when working on multiple projects or issues.	3.21	3.79	0.007
Welcome feedback as an opportunity for growth.	3.71	4.21	0.006
Incorporate feedback into action plans and goals.	3.43	3.86	0.004
Circle back on the feedback you received and the person you received it from to discuss change and growth.	3.29	3.93	0.001
Embrace failure as a critical time of learning.	3.43	4.07	0.001
Find new ways of organizing work area or planning work to accomplish work more efficiently.	2.93	3.71	0.001
Focus & Productivity Statements			
Organize your workstation	3.29	3.86	0.003
Create a daily plan with manageable tasks	3.64	4.00	0.027
Tackle the task at hand; stop multi-tasking	2.93	3.57	0.007
Don't procrastinate	2.50	3.21	0.006
Assess your work-life balance to maintain high performance and sustainability.	3.07	3.71	0.003
Discuss strategies with your supervisor to achieve work-life balance.	3.36	3.93	0.003
Make active choices that promote well-being and success at work and at home.	3.36	3.71	0.027
Assume positive intent.	3.43	3.71	0.020
Share laughter with colleagues.	3.71	4.14	0.004
Make choices every day to build a positive workplace culture.	3.57	4.07	0.014
Acknowledge the fact that there will be challenges, while maintaining a can-do mindset.	3.71	4.29	0.007
Don't take it personally.	3.14	3.79	0.001
Put forth focused effort to ensure work quality.	3.43	4.14	0.000

Double-check your work or have someone else double-check your work for you.	3.43	3.79	0.009
Check your work for accuracy and consistency, then have someone double-check your work for you.	3.36	3.71	0.009
Ask for constructive feedback on how to improve your work quality on a regular basis.	3.29	3.86	0.003
Balance striving for perfection with delivering high-quality work on time.	3.36	3.79	0.004
When identifying and bringing forward a problem, bring suggestions for solutions to address the issue.	3.50	4.07	0.007
Foster a pattern of asking questions and developing solutions or recommendations to continuously improve the process.	3.21	3.79	0.003
Workplace Communication Statements			
Be aware of speed, tone, context.	3.43	4.00	0.001
Use appropriate language, good grammar, and avoid abbreviations.	3.86	4.21	0.048
Communicate requests clearly and concisely.	3.50	3.86	0.009
Productively challenge ideas to build stronger ideas.	3.29	3.86	0.003
Keep team members up to speed on progress.	3.36	3.71	0.009
Communicate your project clearly to all stakeholders.	3.50	3.93	0.004
When in doubt, over communicate.	2.64	3.29	0.001
Do not dominate the discussion, whether written or verbal.	3.43	4.07	0.001
Convey a positive attitude, even when you are working together to address a problem.	3.57	4.07	0.006
Professional in: Phone calls	3.64	4.07	0.004
Professional in: Email	3.64	4.21	0.003
Professional in: Text messages	3.14	3.86	0.000
Professional in: Meetings and events	3.71	4.07	0.009
Professional in: Video conference calls	3.57	4.14	0.003
Professional in: Social Media	3.29	3.71	0.004
Professional in: Follow up and thanks	3.36	4.07	0.001

References and resources:

1. Karimi, H., & Pina, A. (2021). Strategically addressing the soft skills gap among STEM undergraduates. *Journal of Research in STEM Education*, 7(1), 21-46.
2. Power skills onboarding presentation  Power Skills Presentation - September 2024.pptx