

Attitudes Regarding Basic Employability Skills Among Graduates of Agricultural Programs: A Pilot Study

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Background I

- Students enter college with the expectation that they will acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to enter the workforce.
 - Graduates expect that they will have acquired these.
- Employers have an expectation college graduates possess the employability skills required to perform their jobs.
- Faculty consider they are providing students with critical knowledge and capabilities for their careers.

Background II

- However, there is increasing concern in industry, government and academe that graduates lack basic 'employability' skills to succeed.
- That there is a misalignment between academic preparation, the perceptions of students and the needs of employers
 - Resulting in costly remedial training
 - And for some to question the real value of a degree and the higher education system
- This concern is also evident in the Agricultural sector

Critical Employability Skills

/Measurement Items

1. **Communication skills** – the ability to read, write, speak, and listen; and to interpret, assemble and articulate information
2. **Math skills** – ability to perform basic mathematical procedures to solve practical problems
3. **Problem solving skills** - ability to think creatively, make decisions, and solve problems
4. **Management skills** - the activities of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling to meet organizational goals
5. **Interpersonal skills** - ability to work in teams, help others to learn, negotiate, and work in a multicultural organization
6. **Customer service skills** - ability to anticipate and meet the needs of both internal and external customers
7. **Leadership skills** - ability to motivate others to achieve organizational goals
8. **Life-long learning skills** - willingness to assess and recognize one's own strengths and weaknesses and to pursue self-development
9. **Technology skills** - the ability to select procedures, equipment, and tools to acquire and evaluate data
10. **Work ethic** - includes attendance, punctuality, motivation, the ability to meet deadlines, and realistic expectations

Purpose

- To develop a triangular study, investigating the alignment of academic preparation, employers needs, and graduate capabilities in the agricultural field.
- By examining the attitudes of recent graduates, the faculty who taught them, and human resource managers who recruit them.
- Seedcorn funds were received funding from the California Agricultural Research Initiative to implement a pilot study to investigate one of these:
 - whether graduates of the College of Agriculture at Cal Poly Pomona have experienced a skills gap in transiting from university into their careers.

Objective

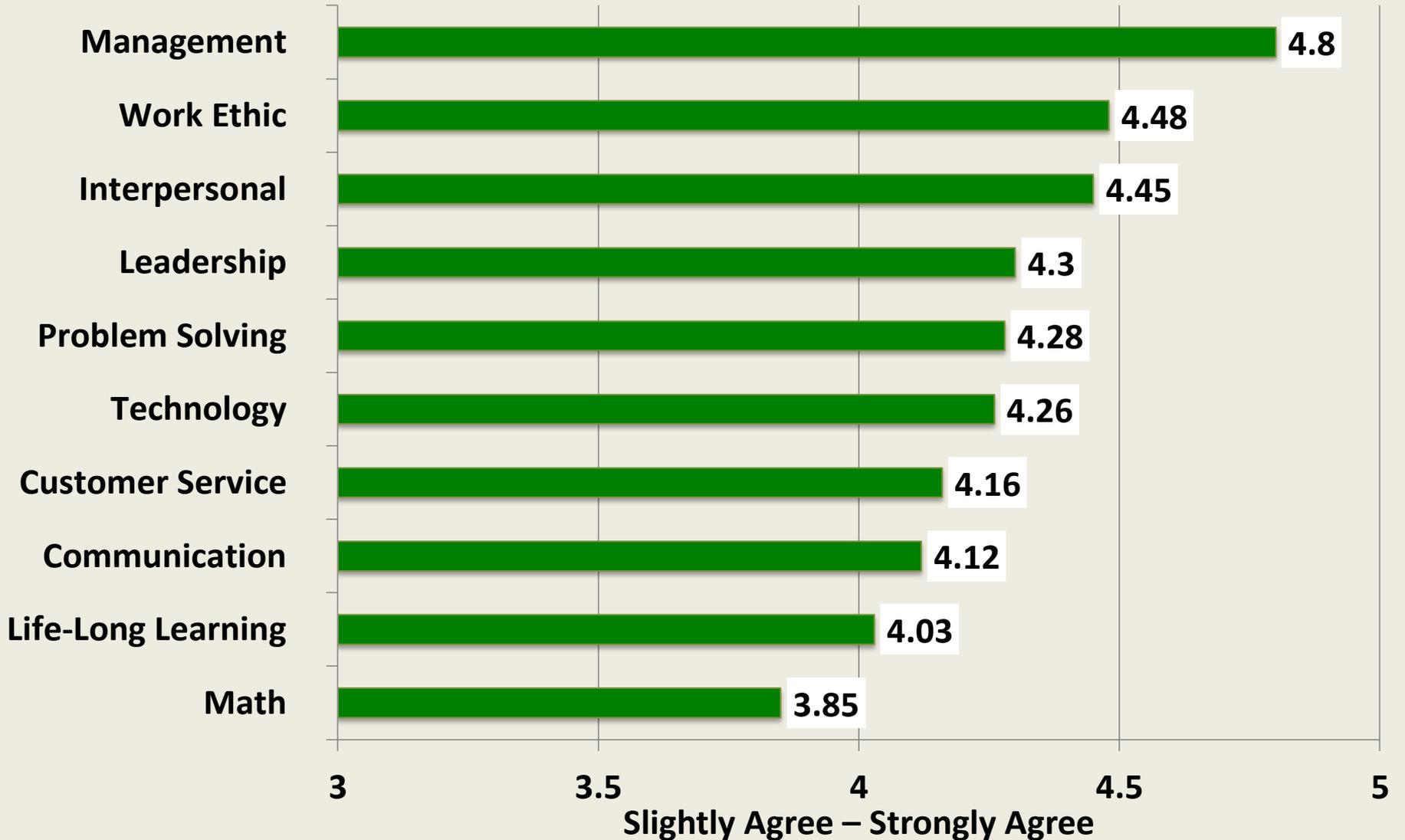
- To identify perceptions of recent College of AG graduates regarding:
 - whether they believed they developed employability skills in college;
 - whether they considered these skills were important for their first job out of college;
 - what they perceived their level of competence at performing these skills was in their first job out of college.

Methodology

- A survey was designed using 5-point Likert scales.
- The ten dimensions of basic employability skills were the focus of this study
- Participants were graduates of the Plant Sciences and Apparel Merchandising & Management departments who graduated within the past 3 years.
 - The most accessible alumni data
- A total of 585 graduates were invited to participate.
- Surveys were completed online.
- The response rate was 16.5%.

Perceived Importance of Skills

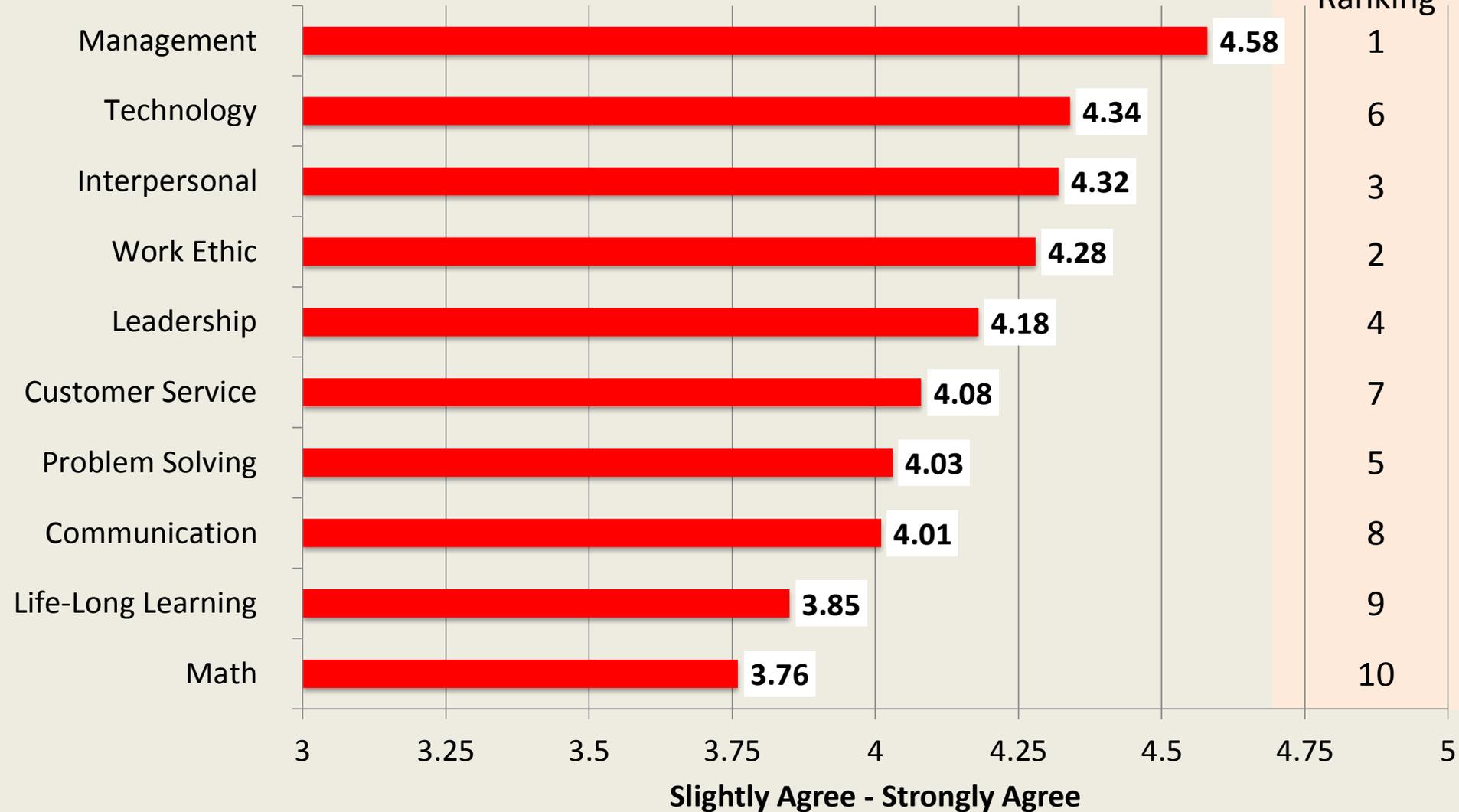
Mean of Responses



Perceived Competency Level

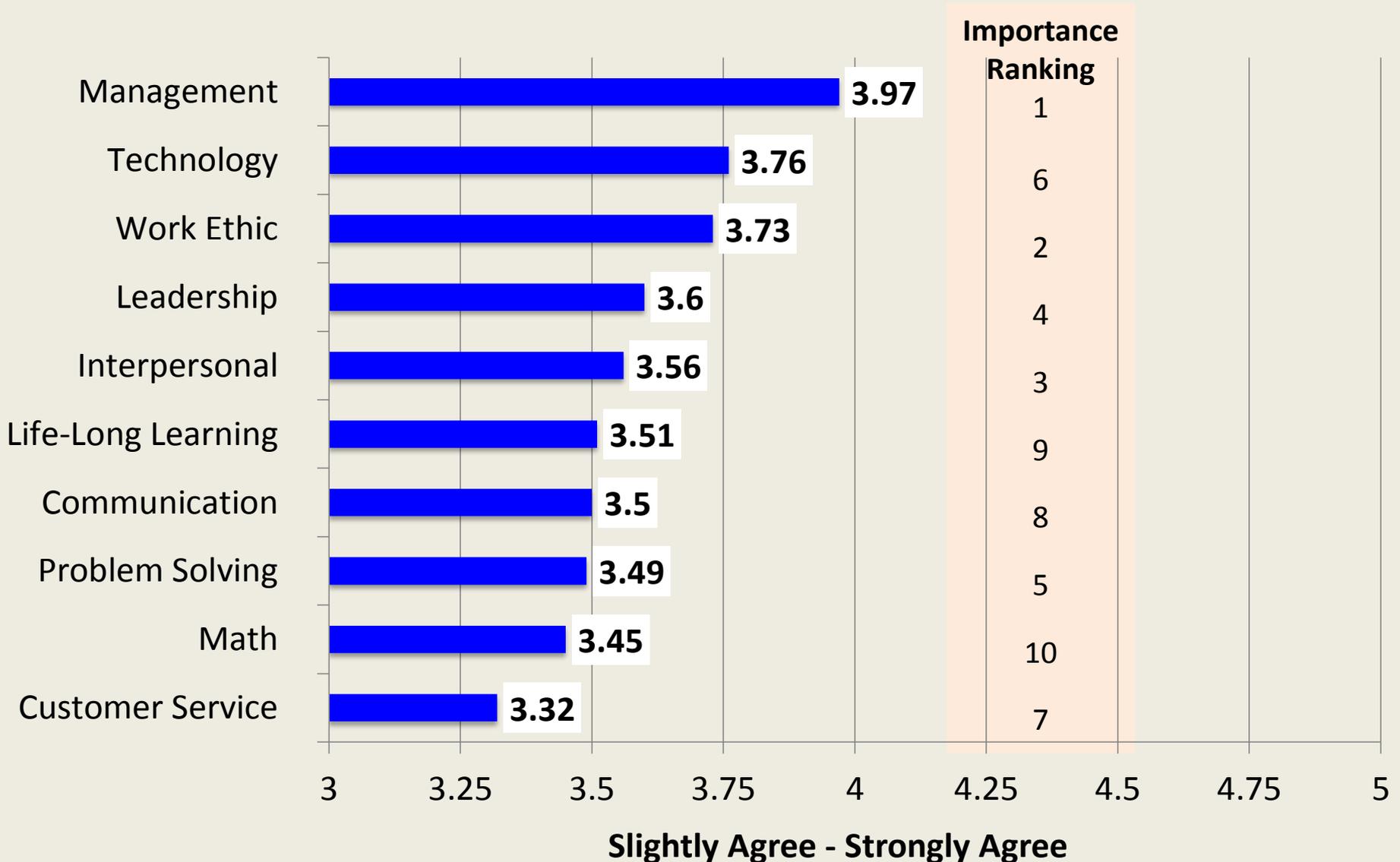
Mean of Responses

Importance
Ranking



Perceived Reception of Skills at College

Mean of Responses



Findings – Importance of Skills

- Graduates ranked math the lowest of the employability skills and communication skills third from bottom.
 - Contrary to the literature that indicates communication and math skills as the most important.
- Graduates ranked management skills and work ethic high.
 - this better corresponds with the literature.

Findings – Competence Level

- Surprisingly, they ranked problem-solving, communication, lifelong learning and math skills lowest among their employability competences.
- Graduates ranked technology skills competence highly but considered it 6th in terms of importance in their first job on graduation.

Findings – Receipt of Skills in College

- Also surprisingly, graduates ranked lifelong learning, communication, problem solving and math skills lowest amongst employability skills received in College.
- Graduates felt that while work ethic was important they ranked the reception of work ethic in college fairly low.

Preliminary Conclusions

- Findings diverge from expectations.
 - Importance of math and communication skills is heavily reinforced throughout Ag programs.
 - Programs place a heavy emphasis on problem solving and professional attitudes.
 - Learn by doing
 - However, they suggest support for the literature in terms of misalignment and the need for remedial training.

Research Limitations

- A pilot study
- Using a convenience sample
 - graduates in two programs at the College.
- Need for a bigger study
 - All college/ multiple colleges
 - A triangular study to examine hypotheses of alignment between employers needs, graduate skills, and program outcomes regarding employability skills.

THANK YOU