

Conformity and Soft Skills as Determinants of Alternatively Credentialed Non-College Graduate Hireability

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Abstract

Despite targeting technical skills, vocational school graduates are paid less than college graduates. This paper hypothesizes that nonconformity stigma and a perceived deficit in soft skills substantially explain reduced alternatively credentialed non-college graduate (ACNG) hireability. Results from an original survey in the United States indicates that willingness to break rules is a key factor of hireability, but the direction of effect is heterogenous by employer type. ACNG job candidates tend to be perceived favorably as creatives or as possible high performers. Selection of traditional candidates is better explained as an employer risk aversion behavior, rather than selection for conformity as a direct property of quality labor. Perceived skill gaps are more important than widely recognized factors of hireability including industrial and state effects. Soft skills are particularly important. Recent college graduates and ACNGs are seen as similarly lacking in soft skills including work ethic. The population of the United States systematically comparatively devalues alternative postsecondary education. Results collectively indicate that nontraditional postsecondary education is undervalued.

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1. Introduction

A substantial gap exists between the skills expected by employers and those possessed by college graduates[1, 2, 3, 4]. Experts view many alternatives to college, such as vocational school, as useful for technical training, but the traditional college degree retains a wage premium over vocational education. This paper tests the hypothesis that there is a lack of willingness to hire an alternatively credentialed non-college graduate (ACNG) which is explained by a perceived lack in certain skills. In particular, this paper hypothesizes that ACNGs are seen as nonconformist and lacking in soft skills. These deficits explain why an ACNG would not be a preferred source of labor in many cases, even if such a candidate does possess superior technical skill.

The signaling model has become one of the standard explanations of the value of the degree. Following this model, scholars claim that the college degree signals intelligence, work ethic, and conformity[5]. Alternative credentials do not signal work ethic or conformity, but they do indicate intelligence and technical skill. This paper tests the hypothesis that employers assume a deficit in the differential properties of conformity and conscientiousness. This paper hypothesizes that employers infer a deficit in conformity and conscientiousness in alternatively credentialed non-college graduates (ACNG) relative to college graduates.

Conscientiousness is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, but there is reason for employers to value imperfect conformity. Firm innovation is attributable to underlying employee innovation, but conformity is antithetical to innovation. Leaders and high performers also behave abnormally, but in a way that is seen as desirable.

Risk aversion represents a separate reason to select for conformity. A risk averse employer with low ability to distinguish high performing outliers from low performing outliers may prefer not to hire an outlier at all. The gamble is particularly expensive for small employers that are unable to spread risk across many hires. A secondary investigation in this paper will be to look for

employer size effects. If large employers are favorable to alternatively educated individuals, this will add weight to an explanation based on risk aversion.

Alternative credentials refer to credentials other than the undergraduate degree[6]. The category includes, for example, industry certifications, portfolios
35 of work, and transcript, badges, or other records of unaccredited learning and achievement. Individuals pursuing alternative credentials typically intend to leverage the credential toward better employment. That is, they have the same ends as college students. Many individuals obtain alternative credentials as a supplement to the degree. Such a situation is pareto-superior to degree attain-
40 ment alone and is therefore intentionally excluded from analysis. This paper focuses on alternatively credentialed non-college graduates in order to better identify stigmata of interest.

2. Methodology

This study uses ordinary least squares regression analysis to estimate the
45 effect of perceived skill gaps on willingness to hire. Perceived skill gaps and willingness to hire are included in original response data collected by online survey ($n = 212$). Observations are cross-sectional and taken at the individual level. The data is available for replication or any other use¹.

Respondents were obtained through the Amazon Mechanical Turk crowd-
50 sourcing service. Respondents were United States citizens at or over the age of eighteen. Respondents were paid for participation. The survey administration took place in July of 2020.

Respondents were asked 65 questions in two sections. The first section of responses describe the respondent. There are 13 questions in this section. The
55 second section identifies perceived skill gaps for 13 skills. Each section beings with a contextual message to normalize response anchoring. Questions are pro-

¹See https://osf.io/8qtxf/?view_only=95b0c0b0c65e4b7983198cc87c2ab733 for data used in this study.

vided in nonrandom order for the same reason. Appendix A provides a copy of the survey.

Data from the second section is used to calculate perceived skill gaps. For each of 13 skills, the respondent is asked to imagine four types of candidates. One type of candidate is an ideal candidate. At a high level, skill gaps are calculated by differencing skill levels of the ideal candidate with others.

Perceived skill is reported on a scale from 1 to 10. Perceived skill is reported for the ideal candidate, the average actual employee, the average recent college graduate, and the average alternatively credentialed non-college graduate. Skill gaps are technically computed in two ways. One method allows for overqualification of job candidates and the other does not. Overqualification effects have been identified as important[7, 8], but these effects are often ignored during skill gap analysis[9].

When overqualification is allowed, the skill gap is measured as a raw skill gap. The raw skill gap is the skill level of the ideal candidate less the skill level of the actual candidate. The skill gap without overqualification is calculated as the raw skill gap or zero if the raw skill gap value is negative.

3. Results

Alternatively credentialed non-college graduate (ACNG) hireability was generally positive. The mean response was 7.5 on a scale from one to ten ($\sigma = 1.80$). Employers status was not associated with a significant response effect. Perceived skill gaps explained a significant and important portion of hireability variance.

Table 1 compares perceived skill gap explanatory power in a simple regression to explanatory power of other simple regressions involving factors of known relevance to hireability. Allowing for overqualification seems to weaken explanatory power. Overqualification effects seem to be heterogeneously signed per skill, so generalizing weakens overall explanatory power relative to ignoring these effects. With overqualification, perceived skill gaps explain about fifty percent more than industrial effects or robust state effects. Without overqualification,

Table 1: Factor Group Explanatory Power in a Simple Regression

Effect Group Name	Adj R-Sqr	R-Sqr	Max p-value
Industry	0.0185	0.0510	0.288
Rulebreaker	0.1432	0.1554	0.053
Skill Gaps with Overqualification	0.0558	0.0737	0.106
Skill Gaps without Overqualification	0.0758	0.0933	0.115
State, Robust	0.0177	0.0503	0.227
State, Semi-Robust	0.0034	0.0648	0.831

the adjusted explanatory power of perceived skill gaps is about three times the adjusted explanatory power of industry or state effects. Semi-robust state factors are dummy variables by state which are significant in a multiple regression. Robust state factors are subset of semi-robust state factors which are additionally significant in a simple regression.

Table 1 also describes the explanatory power of so-called rulebreaker effects. Whether the candidate is perceived as a rule breaker is a perceived skill gap, but employers evaluate this gap in a heterogenous and multispecific way. In the first place, this heterogenous evaluation has sign and magnitude implications for the dependent variable of interest. Secondly, heterogenous evaluation implies a qualitatively different evaluation. These differences are captured using three questions in the first section of the survey.

The three rulebreaker questions measure respondent agreement on a scale from 1 to 10 with statements about rulebreakers, or "People who are willing to break formal or informal rules and norms." The first statement indicates that rulebreakers present a risk to the reputation, productivity, or value of a

company. This statement received the least agreement and greatest response variance among three qualitatively different descriptions of people that are willing to break rules ($\mu = 6.40, \sigma = 2.55$).

105 The second statement states that people break rules which hold them back, and that rulebreakers "could just as easily be high performers as low performers." This statement received the most agreement and least comparative response variance as a rule breaker description ($\mu = 7.42, \sigma = 1.91$). The agreement with this statement provides evidence against the thesis that employers
110 value conformity for its own sake. In turn, this adds weight to the theory that employers value conformity as a risk aversion tactic, but they actually believe nonconformity may signal positive outlier potential. The third description of rulebreakers states that they tend to be gifted in the areas of innovation or creativity, and that such people may benefit the company of a culture
115 ($\mu = 7.25, \sigma = 2.03$).

Each of the three rulebreaker effects turns out to be independently important. These effects collectively explain more than three times as much response variance as do industrial or state effects. Rulebreaker effects are about twice as important as perceived skill gaps. This is not taken to be a general lesson
120 about skill gaps. Willingness to break rules is a special case of a behavior which is valuable under certain parameters. This contrasts with something like poor communication skill which is generally detrimental.

Table 2 reports selected factor statistics across five least squares multiple regressions. The selected factors which are reported include any perceived skill
125 gap which is important in any specification. Factor importance is determined by the ability of a factor to improve model adjusted explanatory power. Model 1 is a multiple regression using skill gaps that allow for overqualification. Model 2 is a multiple regression without overqualification.

Models 3 and 4 are equivalent to models 1 and 2, respectively, after normalizing for certain effects. Industry, state, and company size effects are the
130 specific effects which are normalized. These effects are normalized for robustness by cross-referencing the subfactors from models 1 and 2. Robust effects

Table 2: Table of Multiple Regression on Favorability, Selected Variables

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gap, Body Language	-2.240e-01* (8.314e-02)	-3.831e-01** (1.124e-01)	-1.507e-01+ (8.980e-02)	-3.155e-01* (1.173e-01)	-3.060e-01* (1.145e-01)
Gap, Body Language-IT	2.199e-01+ (1.269e-01)	2.298e-01 (1.656e-01)	1.837e-01 (1.334e-01)	2.791e-01 (1.707e-01)	2.771e-01+ (1.665e-01)
Gap, Commute		-2.320e-01++ (9.720e-02)	-4.953e-02 (6.862e-02)	-1.197e-01 (1.023e-01)	-1.582e-01 (1.010e-01)
Gap, Conscientiousness	2.416e-01* (8.000e-02)	3.223e-01* (1.045e-01)	1.387e-01 (8.483e-02)	2.174e-01+ (1.129e-01)	2.175e-01++ (1.093e-01)
Gap, Customer Service	-1.259e-01+ (6.389e-02)	-1.512e-01 (9.599e-02)	-1.253e-01+ (7.162e-02)	-1.276e-01 (1.037e-01)	-1.323e-01 (1.009e-01)
Gap, Rule Breaker		-6.336e-02 (1.028e-01)	-3.896e-02 (6.054e-02)	-8.535e-02 (1.082e-01)	-1.034e-01 (1.036e-01)
Gap, Salary		-1.135e-01 (8.284e-02)	3.873e-02 (6.597e-02)	-6.250e-03 (8.575e-02)	
Gap, Teamwork		1.227e-01 (9.179e-02)	6.812e-02 (6.963e-02)	1.287e-01 (9.697e-02)	1.131e-01 (9.505e-02)
Gap, Technical	-1.274e-01+ (7.443e-02)		-9.408e-02 (7.702e-02)	-1.010e-01 (1.023e-01)	-9.806e-02 (1.001e-01)
Rulebreaker, Culture Add	2.612e-01** (7.057e-02)	2.829e-01** (7.015e-02)	2.114e-01* (7.187e-02)	2.279e-01* (7.190e-02)	2.235e-01* (7.036e-02)
Rulebreaker, Risky	1.688e-01** (4.993e-02)	1.758e-01** (4.813e-02)	1.517e-01* (5.160e-02)	1.472e-01* (5.063e-02)	1.686e-01** (5.006e-02)
Rulebreaker, Rockstars	1.406e-01+ (7.646e-02)	1.748e-01++ (7.245e-02)	1.669e-01++ (7.851e-02)	1.546e-01++ (7.754e-02)	1.655e-01++ (7.599e-02)
Adj R-sqr	0.3100	0.3491	0.2317	0.2554	0.2866
R-sqr	0.4408	0.4663	0.3409	0.3613	0.3880

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, ++ $p < 0.05$, * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

are retained. For example, some state effects are important in one specification and not in the other. Such state effects are dropped in Models 3 and 4.

135 Model 5 is specified as Model 4 plus two adjustments. First, the factor for salary is dropped. The salary factor improved adjusted explanatory power in Model 2, but it provided no such benefit in any other model. Moreover, the p-value of this factor was unacceptably low in Model 4 ($p > 0.9$). The second adjustment is to add a duration factor.

140 The duration factor is a measure of the length of time a respondent believes it takes to earn an alternative credential. Duration is a categorical variable which was important in both Models 1 and 2. As a categorical variable, it was decomposed into a boolean series for factor analysis. Models 1 and 2 retained one or more duration dummies, but none overlapped. As a result, duration was
145 dropped from Models 3 and 4.

After dropping the salary factor, duration was reanalyzed in the new multiple regressive context. A single duration factor proved important in this reanalysis. The duration factor which indicates that a respondent believes it takes more than a year to obtain an alternative credential is significantly and importantly
150 associated with improved willingness to hire ($\beta = 0.875, p < 0.01$).

An individual is considered an employer if they state that they contribute to hiring and firing decisions. Employer effects are positively signed in all five models, but the significance is lost after normalizing effects. This suggests that employer favorability to alternative credentials is sensitive to industry and state
155 of residence.

The preferred model is able to explain roughly one third of the willingness to hire. 7 of 13 skill gaps investigated contribute to this model, and two stand out as the most significant. Technical skill gaps are insignificant but they are robust across specifications and possess the expected negative sign. Other than
160 technical skill, the remaining gaps are soft skills. Body language skill gaps and skill gaps in work ethic are the two most significant factors in this model. The relative importance of soft skill gaps, and work ethic in particular, adds weight to a revision of the usual signalling explanation as the most plausible story.

An important and complicated finding involves conscientiousness. Notice
165 that the effect is robustly positive across specifications. Simple intuition would
indicate that a large conscientiousness gap is associated with improved hireabil-
ity. This is an oversimplification which results from linear analysis.

A simple regression of conscientiousness on favorability produces an expected
negative sign. That supports the intuitive notion that a lack of conscientiousness
170 is associated with reduced hireability. That result is also an oversimplification.
A synthesis of both results and outside research indicates there is some bliss
point for work ethic. The change in the model constant from the simple regres-
sion to the multiple regression explains the robust sign inversion. In the multiple
regression, the model constant is near 0.5, while in the simple regression it is
175 about 7.5.

In one study, conscientiousness exhibited a parabolic relationship with peer-
rated team contribution[10]. Adding a quadratic term to Model 5 replicates
a negative marginal relation between conscientiousness and teamwork skill. In
addition, conscientiousness exhibits a negative marginal relation with hireability
180 overall.

Complementary to the bliss point explanation is an explanation from atten-
uation. In the current data set, conscientiousness exhibits an important cross-
correlation with several factors including willingness to commute and customer
service skill. Conscientiousness also structurally interacts with independent rule-
185 breaker effects. Theoretically, conscientiousness is related to rule breaking be-
havior, but the effect on hireability is interacted with employer perceptions of
those who break rules. Because these factors are entered independently in the
multiple regression, the underlying component of conscientiousness is entered in
redundantly. Because conscientiousness gaps have a negative effect, the overall
190 negative effect is overstated. The direct factor of conscientiousness corrects,
or attenuates, the the overstated effect which is partialled in, or captured in,
the correlated independent factors. Removal of other skill gap factors and rule-
breaker factors from Model 5 validates this explanation by yielding a negative
coefficient ($\beta = -0.084, p < 0.31$).

195 The importance of conscientiousness does not add weight to the classic signaling explanation. The conscientiousness gap is not a comparative gap between a recent college graduate and a non-college graduate. It is a gap between an ideal job candidate and an ACNG. An important note is that the conscientiousness gap among recent college graduates is statistically no different from
200 an ACNG. Unsurprisingly, the candidate perceived to have a minimal conscientiousness gap is the typical employee already working in the labor force. A comparative gap of note would be that college graduates were perceived to have better technical skills compared to the average ACNG.

Employer size was an important factor in the preferred model. The largest
205 category of employer is positively associated with willingness to hire an ACNG. This matches the risk aversion model. The largest category of employer has lower risk, and in fact generates comparative advantage, when hiring from a high-variance pool of candidate quality.

Some state and industrial effects are identified. No particular relation among
210 state effects was found, but further comparative policy research is encouraged. With respect to industry, an interesting interaction between body language skill and employment in the information technology is identified. The interacted variable has a positive association with willingness to hire. Body language skill gaps on their own are associated with reduced willingness to hire. This specifically
215 indicates a reduced penalty for lacking body language communication skills in the information technology industry. With less strength and more breadth, a positive coefficient to the interaction variable indicates a reduced penalty for generalized soft skill deficiency in the information technology industry.

A reduced penalty for soft skill deficit helps explain the particular flourishing of alternative credentials in the information technology industry. The
220 reduced penalty in this particular industry might be related to a relative lack of deregulation in the industry. Alternatively, it might be related to cultural norms around the acceptability of an anti-social geek in a technology field. The cultural norm itself might be derived from deeper collective personality organization. That is, there is less technical need for social skills in programming and
225

related disciplines, so introverts may naturally obtain a comparative advantage in this field.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that perceived skill gap variance is qualitatively different for alternatively educated non-college graduates. Perceived skill gaps do a better job of explaining willingness to hire than do other widely recognized effects including industry and state effects. Employer factors better explain candidate hireability than do the perceived skill gaps themselves. This paper finds multiple facts in support of employer risk aversion over conformity selection when considering job candidates that lack a college degree. Technical skill gaps were identified with less relevance to the hiring decision when compared with soft skill gaps for the ACNG job candidate.

Some evidence on the role of misinformation is demonstrated in a survey on trade schooling taken in 2019[11]. Only 27 percent of respondents correctly responded that lower debt is an advantage of enrolling in trade school relative to college. Additionally, over 75 percent of respondents failed to notice that trade school graduates receive industry employment sooner and receive specialized training when compared to a four-year college. Obtaining a college degree after obtaining some work experience will allow students to leverage employer tuition benefits.

In addition to the noted applications of the results of this study, there are several ways in which results could be technically improved. The preferred model explains about one third of willingness to hire. This study uses a cross-sectional analysis to investigate a subject that varies over time. The traditional system of accredited undergraduate education was itself at one time an innovation. Abnormal job candidates differentiated themselves using novel credentials, and broad employer adoption was achieved over time. This paper concludes that the alternative credentials of today will follow a similar pattern.

Dynamic technical analysis would yield deeper understanding of such trends

255 and achieve greater overall explanatory power. Dynamic analysis would also
generate better opportunity for causal understanding. Other research has con-
ducted some dynamic analysis of the same dependent variable with differing
independent inputs[12]. Integrated modelling of those effects with skill gap
analysis could replicate results and generate new models of better explanatory
260 power. Specifications that allow for overqualification effects and heterogeneous
curved relations between skill gaps and hireability would improve not only the
present paper, but the state of the art in skill gap analysis.

If perceived skill is representative of actual skill, then the current study
concludes that employers should be more willing to hire alternatively educated
265 non-college graduates. At the same time, this paper demonstrates plausible
misalignment of perceived and actual skill in some cases. Last mile training is
a type of alternative education which has been specifically recommended as a
remedy for technical skill gaps among recent college graduates. It is surprising
that the average recent college graduate in the sample of analysis is perceived
270 to have better technical skill compared to the average ACNG.

Employers seem to be favorable to individuals with alternative credentials.
In many cases, employer-perceived skill gaps are not statistically different when
comparing recent college graduates with ACNG candidates. The relative social
preference for the college degree may be better explained by a lack of relevant
275 credentials for some occupations, government subsidy of the legacy system, and
ignorance about available alternative opportunities on the part of students and
those influencing student enrollment choices.

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