



# On Transferable Skills

*By Billy O'Steen, III, Associate Professor  
School of Leadership and Professional Practice  
The University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

## IT ALL MATTERS. A LOT.

“Can you please help my husband and me? You’re our last option.”

The woman’s voice was desperate and hoping. I received this call one month into my job as a constituent relations caseworker for U.S. Senator Jim Sasser after just graduating with a B.A. in English and history from Vanderbilt University. She was calling from the Senator’s home state of Tennessee and her husband, a former coal miner, was way overdue for his black lung payments from the Department of Labor and their bills were piling up.

While it might be considered a stretch from studying Milton, Shakespeare, and the Romantic Poets in the hallowed classrooms in Nashville to problem-solving a missing black lung payment, maybe not. You see, during my studies of English literature and European history, I picked up key transferable skills—some without even knowing—including analysis, collaboration, communication, and, yes, problem-solving. So, with my trusty “big yellow book” that included most federal employees, I set about to find the exact person in the vast Department of Labor who was responsible for black lung payments. To my surprise and delight, I found another young university graduate just as eager to solve the puzzle as I was. After several days of sleuthing, we found that the file had slipped down underneath the other folders and our constituent was due nearly \$1 million in back-payments and interest. A huge win for the miner and his wife, the Senator, and the Department of Labor!

When I called the woman to inform her of the good news, I realized that everything I experienced in my education to that point had truly mattered. In this instance, it mattered in a very real-life sense that I had learned how to communicate

and collaborate through my classes at Vanderbilt. Those excellent professors I had known this—that their job was to prepare me to be a capable, competent, confident, and contributing citizen and not just a consumer of academic content. This realization has profoundly affected how I design and facilitate transferable experiences for my students through having a dual focus on content and skills. Comparing two of Shakespeare’s sonnets is, at once, an activity to engage with the Bard’s content while also practicing analytical skills that are useful when later comparing cars, mortgages, or job opportunities. For the majority of my students, they will not become an academic like me so my job, like my Vanderbilt professors, is to prepare them to do other things—work at the bank, sell insurance, become lawyers, start non-profits, etc. As I often say to my students, my goal is not for them to become “pro” students but to become “pro” citizens. This approach requires both of us to acknowledge that what we do in our university classrooms really matters.

I’ve had the good fortune to further pursue this idea about what matters and transferability through participating in and researching the impact of Outward Bound courses. It has been an ideal context through which to consider transferability. Similar to what I say to my students, you don’t do Outward Bound to get better at Outward Bound. You do Outward Bound to get better at life. The transferability aspects that ring true with Outward Bound—authentic assessment, challenge, metaphor, physical engagement, and specific and timely feedback—can readily be applied in a university classroom. The key with teaching for transferability like this is for both students and teachers to believe that it all matters. A lot. ●

*“Can you please help my husband and me? You’re our last option.”*