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CREATING A CERTIFICATE PROGRAM FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATIONS EXCELLENCE WITH VIRTUAL REALITY AND AI [ABSTRACT]

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	To help enable educators to use technology to improve durable skills. We develop a certificate that uses virtual reality and artificial intelligence, designed to improve durable skills in public speaking and interpersonal communication.
Background	Recent surveys of employers indicate that graduates lack durable skills. They report that graduates have difficulty communicating with customers in person and online. They also report a decline in professionalism in public settings. More needs to be done to address this issue, as it has become a reason graduates lose their jobs soon

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after being hired. Higher education needs to address this concern to ensure that students are prepared for the workforce. This involves both setting up programs to increase training within courses or the curriculum and providing value to stakeholders.

Methodology	A literature review on virtual reality pedagogy was conducted to identify suitable technologies and methods for developing a certificate program. Concurrently, informal interviews and coordination with the college advisory committee identified additional skills to inform curriculum development. The resulting Professional Communication Excellence Certificate was piloted in an undergraduate business communication course, using VR simulations and AI-powered feedback alongside real-world assessments evaluated by faculty and advisory board members.
Contribution	The study outlines how to develop a curriculum for a credentialing program focused on improving communication through AI and virtual reality. The program includes assurance-of-learning measures that are available upon request.
Findings	The pilot program included 28 of the 69 students enrolled in an undergraduate business communication course in the first cohort, which began in Spring 2026. The students' voluntary participation suggests strong demand for certification, despite the substantial time required to earn it.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Higher education needs to address the perceived lack of durable skills among recent graduates. We designed a program that promotes communication through technology, reduces demands on faculty, and provides students with immediate feedback.
Recommendations for Researchers	Durable skills should receive greater emphasis in research to help prepare students for the workplace. Further investigation into durable skills is necessary to assess students' career readiness and to examine how durable skills training benefits them over time. This would highlight the lasting importance of these skills and underscore the need for continuous skill development.
Impact on Society	The program's popularity showed that people value earning a certificate that enhances their written, visual, and verbal communication skills. By developing programs that strengthen these skills, we will enhance higher education's ability to produce graduates prepared for the modern workforce.
Future Research	More studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of different interventions, and other studies should examine how soft-skill education benefits people over the course of their careers.
Keywords	virtual reality, artificial intelligence, durable skills, communication, AI feedback

AUTHORS



Dr. Jeffrey Bohler is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Information Systems Department at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM) College of Business. After earning a PhD in Management of Information Technology and Innovation, Dr. Bohler has dedicated himself to teaching and researching the impact of emerging technologies on business and society. His research focuses on decision-making, the role of educational technologies in higher education, and the economic and societal impacts of artificial intelligence.



Ryan Reid is currently the Visiting Assistant Professor of Management at Auburn University at Montgomery's (AUM) College of Business. He holds an MBA, MPhil, MMAS, and BS in Physics and is completing his MPA. He is a retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel, serving 27 years across various career fields. Having led the AUM Army ROTC Battalion for four years and taught mid-career officers at the USAF's Air University, he discovered a passion for developing future leaders through broadening their worldviews. His work focuses on developing communication skills, team development, and organizational leadership. His research centers on the characteristics of successful irregular warfare leaders and how they may be applied by leaders facing challenges in the modern world.



Benjamin Larson is an associate professor at Auburn University at Montgomery. He obtained his PhD from Auburn University and began his academic career at Troy University, where he served as an assistant professor, associate professor, and department chair for the Department of Decision Systems and Sciences at the Sorrell College of Business. He also holds an MBA with a concentration in information systems and a bachelor's degree in agricultural business from Iowa State University. He has more than 10 years of industry experience in accounting and information systems, serving as a regional controller, internal auditor, and business analyst. His research interests include education, human-computer interactions, business analytics, and decision quality.



Ichhya Shrestha is a master's student in Management Information Systems at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM), currently in her fifth semester. She works as a Graduate Research Assistant in the Information Systems department. She serves as President of the Research Club, where she leads and promotes student-driven research initiatives and fosters collaboration among students. With a strong interest in technology, data analytics, and innovation, she actively contributes to academic and research-based projects that address real-world business challenges. Ichhya has been recognized as the Outstanding Student for the MSMIS program, reflecting her academic excellence, leadership, and dedication.



Sushma Garaka is a master's student in Management Information Systems at Auburn University at Montgomery, currently in her final semester. She serves as a Graduate Assistant in the Office of Distance Education and Collaborative Partnerships and works as a Student Assistant in Student Affairs. She is the founder and President of the NextGen Innovation Club, which promotes innovation and collaboration among students. Passionate about technology, she focuses her research on artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. She actively participates in campus events and initiatives, demonstrating a strong commitment to academic excellence, innovation, and advancing technology-driven solutions.



Joshua Tobias is a second-semester MBA student at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM), concentrating in Artificial Intelligence, and is expected to graduate in Summer 2026. With a strong interest in AI's impact on business innovation, he builds on his bachelor's degree in General Business and a minor in Psychology by bringing a broad perspective to his graduate studies. Joshua currently supports instruction as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for Leadership, Organizational Behavior, and Business Communications courses. Motivated by his own connection to the military, he previously supported students at the Veterans and Military Resource Center on campus and now serves as Vice President of the Student Veterans of America chapter at AUM, helping military-connected scholars navigate their college experience. His academic and professional interests focus on how artificial intelligence is transforming business, management, and organizational behavior, shaping how businesses lead, adapt, and grow in a rapidly changing world.