

## Creating Data-Driven Undergraduate Student Engineering Typologies to Shape the Future of Work

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## Introduction

The engineering profession is overwhelmingly practiced in complex organizational settings. An engineering student graduating today will likely have to navigate an interdisciplinary and intergenerational maze. Compounding matters is that engineering curricula have struggled to keep pace with the acceleration of emerging technologies. It is not inconceivable that graduating engineers could find themselves working with people from three other generations (Baby Boomers to Gen Y) from different disciplines (engineering and otherwise) on technologies that are not part of their core training. Thus, there is little room for misalignment in personal characteristics within workgroups. This can be best remedied if engineering students develop a deep understanding of themselves and, more importantly, if they are able to articulate that understanding during the hiring and onboarding processes.

There are a number of ways where a student can gain such deep understanding. In this work, the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite was used. The TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite is designed to increase the understanding of an individual's talents in three distinct areas: competencies, motivators and behavioral traits. There is extensive information in the individual TTI reports (over fifty dimensions) that informs and guides the student toward a deep understanding. However, that can be a double-edged sword in that it is hard to communicate out and even harder for engineering programs and hiring organizations to find it actionable.

It is the need for actionability that has driven the necessity to distill the TTI dimensions into typologies that are the central part of this work. For engineering education programs, these typologies will make it possible to devise curricular and co-curricular elements to help students improve themselves and ultimately become effective in the workplace in a shorter period of time. They could also better inform a student's choice of core-curriculum courses, electives and selecting minors or micro-credentials. For hiring organizations, these typologies will better inform their hiring decision and, more importantly, the placements of undergraduate engineering students where they can be most successful and productive as well as create work-life balance.

The typologies are statistically derived from cluster analyses on the parameters from the TTI reports of 251 undergraduate engineering students who took the assessment suite between 2017 and 2019 as well as 93 graduate students from a selective professional master program. Cluster analysis has been used in engineering education research over the last two decades [1] to understand the relationship between the future aspirations of engineering students and how they conduct themselves while in college [2, 3] as well as to inform curriculum redesign [4, 5].

These typologies are matched with generalized categories of engineering jobs to provide new insights and techniques for strengthening the engineering talent pipeline and proactively help shape the future of work.

## The TTI Instrument

The data used in the cluster analysis was obtained using the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite ([www.ttisi.com](http://www.ttisi.com)). The TTI Survey consists of three self-reporting assessment instruments administered via an online portal. It is designed to increase the understanding of one's talents and abilities in three distinct areas: competencies (both personal and professional); motivators (what drives one's actions); and, behavioral style (including the traits of how one interacts in the professional world), see Figure 1.

Along with a narrative description of characteristics and “do's and don'ts” coaching, the TTI survey provides a ranking of four behavioral descriptors described in table A1 of the Appendix as well as twelve behavioral traits given in Table A2 of the Appendix. There are six motivators that are shown in table A3 and twenty-five competencies determined and ranked by the TTI survey and presented, along with descriptions, in Table A4 of the Appendix.

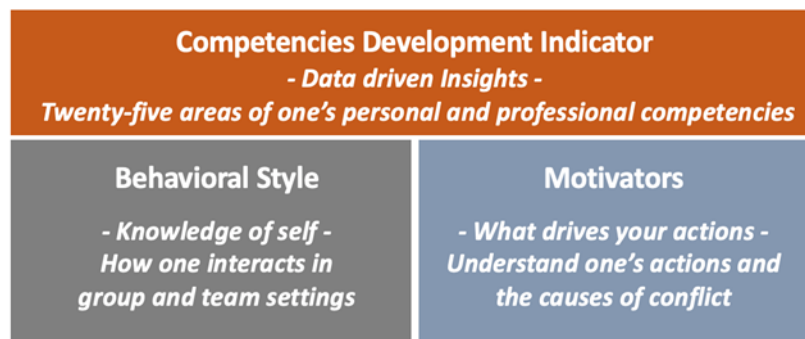


Figure 1 – TTI TriMetrix DNA Assessment Suite - Competencies, Behavioral Style and Motivators

The TTI survey has been used to identify traits and competencies that are believed to be associated with entrepreneurial mindset [6, 7] and to guide engineering education towards producing graduates with said mindset [8].

The choice of using the TTI survey for this study was based on the needs of the co-op program at University of Detroit Mercy in relation to its mission to help students succeed in their nascent professional engineering careers. Engineering students at Detroit Mercy are required to have three one-semester long co-ops as a graduation requirement and must seek a co-op at the end of the freshman year. The TTI survey is designed to help students get a better understanding of themselves, thus making them better prepared to communicate effectively with prospective employers during the job search and interviews. The TTI survey is administered at the beginning of freshman year in order to help students answer basic questions that should be expected in employment screening and interviews, questions such as “tell me about yourself” and “what are some of your strengths and weaknesses?”

The TTI survey is also administered following the second of three co-op semesters around the time when engineering students are at a stage where they would benefit from early career

coaching, primarily focused on working from their strengths and managing their professional relationships.

On the graduate level, the TTI survey is administered to professional students in a selective master program in product development as part of onboarding and cohort building activities.

### **Process and Method**

The TTI Survey was first administered to incoming freshmen students (within four weeks of entering college) and then again at the beginning of junior year after the students have completed two co-op rotations (a minimum of one is required). In total, the TTI survey was administered to 148 freshman students and 103 junior students between the fall semester of 2017 and the fall semester of 2019. This number accounts for the total engineering students in all four years. The survey was first administered as an assignment in the Introduction to Co-op course (students receive a pass/fail grade in the course) which is a required one-credit, lecture-based co-op preparatory course in the first semester. A participation grade was given to students who took the survey in order to encourage participation, but the grade was designed to be inconsequential in order to minimize the possibility of freshmen students taking such an intimate survey under duress. Regardless, the survey participation for freshmen students who completed the course was 98%.

The TTI survey was administered again in the junior year in the context of the Professional Practice of Engineering course, which is a required lecture-based course that students take after completion of a minimum of one co-op semester. The survey was required and was used in a significant assignment in which students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and on how to leverage the former and mitigate the latter. The survey participation for junior students who completed the course was 100%.

The TTI survey was also administered to ninety-three (93) graduate students in a professional masters program in product development, which draws early career engineering professionals. This group is considered to be successful in their careers as admission requires that each student be nominated by management in a competitive process. These professional students were used both in defining the typologies using cluster analysis as well as in gaging whether there was any career success differences between the clusters.

The cluster analysis was conducted using the R-Statistical Package (<https://www.r-project.org/>). The outputs from the TTI survey were transformed into z-scores (by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation  $(x-\mu)/\sigma$ ) to ensure that variables are compared based on the same scales. The analysis used the following elements from the R-Statistical Package: Package 'cluster' which is used to find groups in data [9]; and, package 'factoextra' which is used to extract and visualize the results of multivariate data analyses [10].

The Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (HCA) approach was employed to define the clusters for the above-described analysis. This approach consists of two main steps: determining the ideal HCA parameters in order to determine the appropriate number of clusters; and, performing the HCA. The starting point to searching for the appropriate number of clusters was determined to be the

agglomerative approach where each individual object is considered a cluster, which are then narrowed down using a dissimilarity measure of the Euclidean distance between objects.

The ideal number of clusters was based on finding the closest agreement between the following three approaches to defining dissimilarity: 1) the cluster sum of squares or “elbow” method which computes within cluster variance; 2) the silhouette method which compares average distance within cluster to average distance to nearest neighbor cluster; and 3) the gap statistic which is based on the pooled within-cluster sum of squares. The end point of this work was the determination that the ideal number of clusters was three. This choice of the number of clusters was validated by the visual observation the cluster plot of the top two principal component analysis (PCA) variables, shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 – Cluster plot of the top two principal component analysis variables showing the three distinct clusters.

### Comparison of Behavioral Descriptors

The behavioral descriptors (Dominance D, Influencing I, Steadiness S and Compliance C) described in table A1 of the Appendix, are probably the most revealing as far as creating a

narrative of the emerging typologies associated with the three clusters. Figure 3 shows the ranking of the DISC parameters for the three clusters.



Figure 3 – The mean DISC rankings for the three distinct clusters.

The DISC ranking has associated word descriptors that further illustrate the associated behaviors. These word descriptors are given for the DISC variables and for the three clusters in Table 2.

Table 2 – Word descriptors of the four DISC traits for the three clusters

	<b>Dominance</b>	<b>Influencing</b>	<b>Steadiness</b>	<b>Compliance</b>
<b>Cluster 1</b>	Cooperative	Skeptical	Predictable	Systematic
<b>Cluster 2</b>	Cautious	Convincing	Predictable	Firm
<b>Cluster 3</b>	Competitive	Poised	Restless	Self-willed

The following narrative is taken from the TTI survey reports and included here for a more detailed understanding of the stereotypical person in each cluster, which in turn will inform the typologies.

**Cluster 1:** On one’s approach to solving problems, s/he is somewhat conservative and will accept challenges by being quite calculating. S/he is cooperative, avoids confrontation and wants to be seen as a person who is "easy" to work with. On one’s approach to influencing others, s/he is undemonstrative, presents facts without embellishments and likes to let facts and figures stand for themselves. S/he feels persuasion needs to be objective and straightforward. Her/his trust level is based on each interaction--the past is the past. On one’s response to the pace of the environment, s/he is comfortable in an environment in which there is a relaxed demeanor, or one in which patience is looked at as a virtue. S/he prefers to complete one task before starting the next and prefers an environment that is predictable. On one’s response to the rules and procedures, s/he naturally is cautious and concerned for quality. S/he likes to be on a team that takes responsibility for the final product. S/he enjoys knowing the rules and can become upset when others fail to comply with the rules.

Cluster 2: On one's approach to solving problems, s/he is cautious and does not attempt to demand that one's view, or opinion, be accepted at face value. S/he likes to solve problems within the framework of a team environment and looks for a compromise as opposed to a win-lose situation. On one's approach to influencing others, s/he is enthusiastic about one's ability to influence others and seeks the opportunity to deal with different types of individuals. S/he is trusting and also wants to be trusted. On one's response to the pace of the environment, s/he is comfortable in an environment in which there is a relaxed demeanor, or one in which patience is looked at as a virtue. S/he prefers to complete one task before starting the next and prefers an environment that is predictable. On one's response to the rules and procedures, s/he is independent by nature and somewhat self-willed. S/he is open to new suggestions and can, at times, be seen as somewhat freewheeling. S/he is most comfortable in an environment where the constraints can be "loosened" for certain situations.

Cluster 3: On one's approach to solving problems, s/he is inquisitive, outwardly competitive and adventuresome by nature. S/he is results-oriented and likes to be innovative. S/he is not necessarily confrontational by nature but will not shy away from confrontation if the need arises. On one's approach to influencing others, s/he is sociable and optimistic and able to use an emotional appeal to convince others of a certain direction. S/he likes to be on a team and may be the spokesman for the team. S/he will trust others and likes a positive environment in which to relate. On one's response to the pace of the environment, s/he likes mobility and can handle the absence of routine. S/he feels comfortable juggling different projects and is able to move from one project to another fairly easily. On one's response to the rules and procedures, s/he is independent by nature and feels comfortable in situations where the constraints are few and far between. S/he will follow rules that s/he agrees with, has a tendency to rebel from rules set by others and wants input into any constraints.

### **Comparison of Behavioral Traits**

The twelve behavioral traits listed and described in Table A2 of the Appendix are also very revealing in terms of the differences between the three clusters of students. Figure 4 shows towering differences in traits between the three clusters.

Observing Figure 4 shows that cluster1 scored very high on: Organized Workplace, which is the propensity to establish and maintain specific order in daily activities; Analysis, which is the ability to compile, confirm and organize information; Consistent, which is the ability to perform predictably in repetitive situations; Persistence, which is the ability to finish tasks despite challenges or resistance; and, Following Policy, which is the propensity to adhere to rules, regulations, or existing methods.

Meanwhile, cluster 2 scored much higher on: Interaction, which is the propensity to frequently engage and communicate with others; People-Oriented, which is the ability to build rapport with a wide range of individuals; and, Customer-oriented, which is the ability to identify and fulfill customer expectations.

Cluster 3 members scored very high on the following four traits: Urgency, which is the propensity to take immediate action; Interaction, which is the propensity to frequently engage

and communicate with others; Competitive, which is the propensity to want to win or gain an advantage; Versatile, which is the ability to adapt to various situations with ease; and, Frequent Change, which is the ability to rapidly shift between tasks.

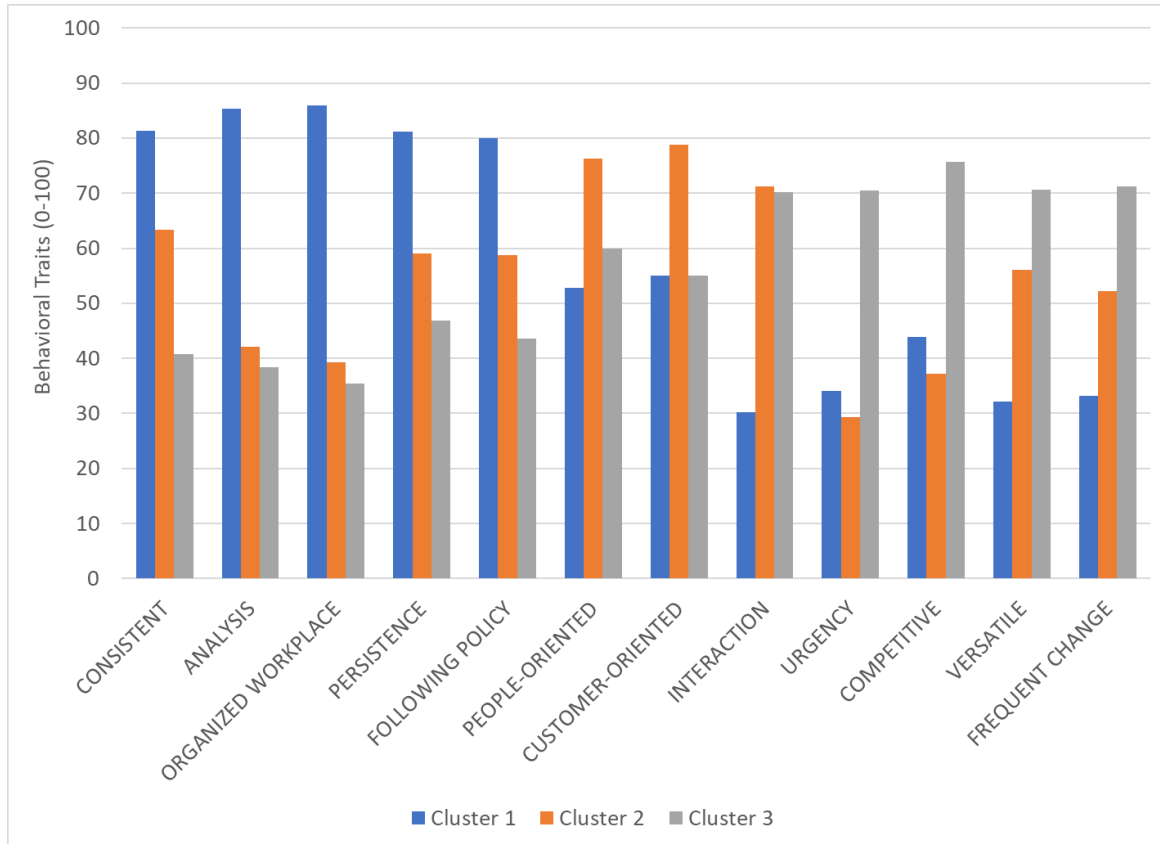


Figure 4 – The mean behavioral traits for the three distinct clusters.

### Comparison of Drivers/Motivators

The three clusters of students did not show a marked difference on the mean in the drivers/motivators category, shown in figure 5. That said, there were enough of a variation for one to draw soft observations, given below.

Cluster 1: Members of this cluster are intellectuals, motivated by learning and new knowledge. They tend to be practical and value money and the stability that it affords. They are driven by an affinity for order and tradition.

Cluster 2: Members of this cluster are driven by an inherent love of people and tend to be kind and unselfish. They have an affinity for form and harmony and value the artistic sides of things.



Cluster 3: Members of this cluster are individualistic and value power, influence and renown. They are also motivated by learning and new knowledge. They are also practical in their approach to money and finances.

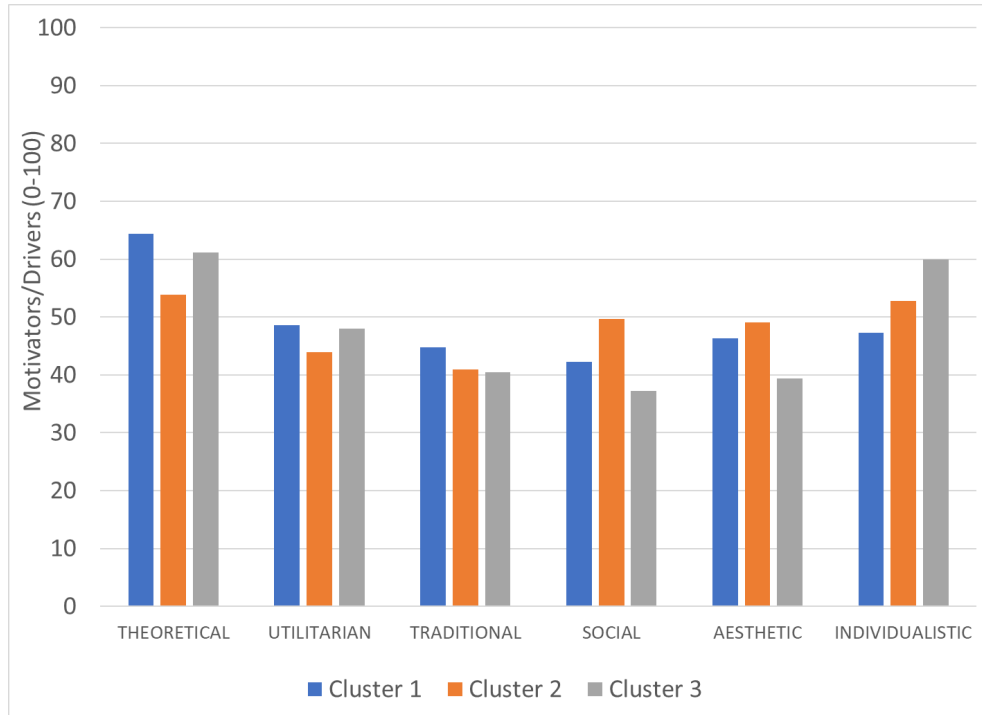


Figure 5 – The mean drivers/motivators for the three distinct clusters.

### Comparison of Competencies

There are twenty-five competencies that are assessed by the TTI survey. For the purposes of this work, these competencies are grouped into the following five categories: Diplomacy and leadership; Empathy and mentorship; Self-management; Process management; and, Learning and Cognition. The categories and associated competencies are given in Table 3.

The results for the mean competencies per cluster are given in Figures 6, 7 and 8 for the various categories given in Table 3. Of the twenty-five competencies over five categories, members of Cluster 3 scored higher than the others on twenty-two. Members of Cluster 2 scored higher on “Diplomacy” and “Appreciating Others” while members of Cluster 3 scored higher on “Decision Making” only. This skewed increased performance for members of Cluster 3 requires a closer look as one cannot discount the possibility that it is an artifact of the statistics. This will be the subject of future work.

Table 3 – Competency groupings in five categories

	Categories				
	Diplomacy & leadership	Empathy & mentorship	Self-management	Process management	Learning & cognition
Competencies	Conflict management	Appreciating others	Goal orientation	Planning and organizing	Conceptual thinking
	Diplomacy	Employee development	Personal accountability	Project management	Creativity and innovation
	Influencing others	Interpersonal skills	Self-starting	Time and priority management	Futuristic thinking
	Leadership	Teamwork	Resiliency	Customer focus	Problem solving
	Negotiation	Understanding others	Flexibility	Decision making	Continuous learning



Figure 6 – Mean competencies for the three clusters in the Diplomacy & Leadership and the Empathy & Mentorship categories



Figure 7 – Mean competencies for the three clusters in the Self-management and the process management categories.

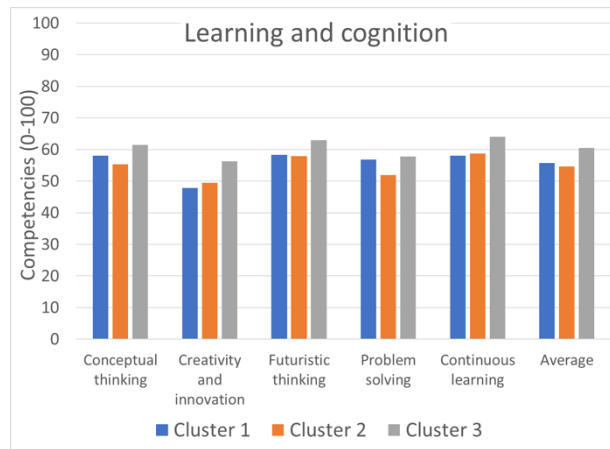


Figure 8 – Mean competencies for the three clusters in the Learning and cognition category

### Discussion of Typologies

Translating the three clusters to typologies is centered on the behavioral traits and descriptors (Figures 3 and 4) as these showed a clear distinction between the three clusters. The motivators and competencies have revealed far less distinction between the clusters and in non-obvious ways.

Looking at Figure 3, one can think of cluster 1 as having a Steadiness Compliance (SC) typology with cluster 2 viewed as having an Influencing Steadiness (IS) and cluster 3 as having a Dominance Influencing (DI) typologies. The following are brief descriptions of the typologies and which employment is the best use of their strength.

SC typology: Engineers with an SC typology value structure (both in their physical environment and in their use of time), do well with repetitive tasks and can see a job to completion despite difficulties and setbacks. Engineers with this typology are more accepting of rules and norms and tend to be conservative in their thinking. They are analytical and deliberative in their decision-making process. They have difficulties switching between tasks and prefer to deal with one thing at a time. They are very deliberative in taking on projects and work and do not thrive in a competitive environment. They are not people-centered in a professional setting. The types of engineering employments that best suit the strength of the SC type engineer are: quality control and assurance; research and development; process engineering, among others.

IS Typology: Engineers with an IS typology are customer-oriented, value interacting with other people and work in a collaborative environment. They are deliberative when taking on new responsibilities and do not have a sense of urgency or need for competition. They tend to be somewhat flexible with the rules in favor of serving the interests of a team or a client. The types of engineering employments that best suit the strength of the IS type engineer are: sales engineers; design and release engineers (interfacing with suppliers); personnel management, among others.

DI Typology: Engineers with an DI typology are competitive, aggressive in taking on projects and have a sense of urgency. They are versatile and easily adapt to changing routine and incongruities. They value working with other people and tend to seek leadership positions on teams. They tend to value rules and traditions less than the other typologies. The types of engineering employments that best suit the strength of the DI type engineer are: entrepreneurial and other start-up environments; product development and prototyping; consulting, among others.

A final thought in this work involves the question of which of the typologies is better represented in the workforce and which is more likely to be successful. The beginning of an answer to this question resides in the number of graduate students in each cluster. Remember that the graduate students are nominated by their management into a selective master program and are thus deemed successful. Out of the 93 graduate students in the total sample population, 35 (38%) were in cluster 1 (SC Typology), 22 (24%) were in cluster 2 (IS typology) and 36 (39%) were in cluster 3 (DI Typology). Meanwhile, out of the 251 undergraduates in the sample, 130 (52%) were in cluster 1, 62 (25%) were in cluster 2 and 59 (23%) were in cluster 3. Thus, cluster 1 representation is reduced between the undergraduate and the professional graduate student population while cluster 3 is increased and cluster 2 is the same. Given that the undergraduate students were samples at the freshman and junior years, it is not clear whether graduation rates are a factor and a firm conclusion cannot be drawn.

## **Conclusion**

Cluster analysis was conducted on the competencies, driving forces and behavioral traits of engineering students obtained from the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite. Three clusters emerged that delineated students into three distinct typologies: Steadiness Compliance (SC) typology describing engineers who value an orderly pace of work with a respect for processes and rules ; Influencing Steadiness (IS) typology describing engineers who value working and influencing people while maintaining an orderly pace; Dominance Influencing (DI) typology describing engineers who are aggressive in the way they approach projects while working with people to achieve goals.

This research provides data driven insights that can be used by engineering educators to better understand distinct segments of undergraduate students. This new knowledge can be used to better support student learning objectives, modify pedagogical approaches and enhance engineering education. Although insightful and enlightening more research using the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite across more institutions is called for. The authors intend for this work to attract the interest of other faculty from a cross section of academic institutions with the goal expanding this research in both scope and scale.

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## Appendices

Table A1 – Behavioral descriptors analyzed by the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite

<b>Behavioral descriptors</b>	<b>Description</b>
Dominance (D)	How one solves problems and meets challenges
Influence (I)	How one influences people
Steadiness (S)	How one responds to the pace of the environment
Compliance (C)	How one responds to rules and procedures set by others

Table A2 – Behavioral traits analyzed by the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite

<b>Behavioral trait</b>	<b>Description</b>
Urgency	Take immediate action
Interaction	Frequently engage and communicate with others
Organized workplace	Establish and maintain specific order in daily activities
Analysis	Compile, confirm and organize information
Competitive	Want to win or gain an advantage
Versatile	Adapt to various situations with ease
People-oriented	Build rapport with a wide range of individuals
Frequent change	Rapidly shift between tasks
Consistent	Perform predictably in repetitive situations
Customer-oriented	Identify and fulfill customer expectations
Persistence	Finish tasks despite challenges or resistance
Following policy	Adhere to rules, regulations, or existing methods

Table A3 – Motivators analyzed by the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite

<b>Motivators</b>	<b>Description</b>
Theoretical	Driven by discovery of knowledge and appetite for learning
Utilitarian	Driven by an interest in money and what is useful
Social	Driven by an inherent love of people
Individualistic	Driven by an interest in power
Traditional	Driven by an affinity for order and tradition
Aesthetic	Driven by an interest in form and harmony

Table A4 – Competencies determined by the TTI TriMetrix® DNA assessment suite

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Description</b>
Appreciating others	Identifying with and caring about others
Conceptual thinking	Analyzing hypothetical situations, patterns and/or abstract concepts to formulate connections and new insights
Conflict management	Understanding, addressing and resolving conflict constructively
Continuous learning	Taking initiative to regularly learn new concepts, technologies and/or methods
Creativity and innovation	Creating new approaches, designs, processes, technologies and/or systems to achieve the desired result
Customer focus	Anticipating, meeting and/or exceeding customer needs, wants and expectations
Decision making	Analyzing all aspects of a situation to make consistently sound and timely decisions
Diplomacy	Effectively and tactfully handling difficult or sensitive issues
Employee development/coaching	Facilitating, supporting and contributing to the professional growth of others

Flexibility	Readily modifying, responding and adapting to change with minimal resistance
Futuristic thinking	Imagining, envisioning, projecting and/or creating what has not yet been actualized
Goal orientation	Setting, pursuing and attaining goals, regardless of obstacles or circumstances
Influencing others	Personally affecting others actions, decisions, opinions or thinking
Interpersonal skills	Effectively communicating, building rapport and relating well to all kinds of people
Leadership	Organizing and influencing people to believe in a vision while creating a sense of purpose and direction
Negotiation	Listening to many points of view and facilitating agreements between two or more parties
Personal accountability	Being answerable for personal actions
Planning and organizing	Establishing courses of action to ensure that work is completed effectively
Problem solving	Defining, analyzing and diagnosing key components of a problem to formulate a solution
Project management	Identifying and overseeing all resources, tasks, systems and people to obtain results
Resiliency	Quickly recovering from adversity
Self-starting	Demonstrating initiative and willingness to begin working
Teamwork	Cooperating with others to meet objectives
Time and priority management	Prioritizing and completing tasks in order to deliver desired outcomes within allotted time frames
Understanding others	Understanding the uniqueness and contributions of others