

Research Corner

Studies and analysis from the world of liberal education

A DEEP-SEATED CONVICTION

Employers feel strongly that a college degree is worth it

In July 2025, a Gallup poll found that 42 percent of Americans had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education, up from 36 percent in both 2023 and 2024. However, a September 2025 poll from the Pew Research Center found that 70 percent of the US public believes higher education is headed in the wrong direction—an increase from the 56 percent who said this in 2020. Yet despite the general public’s fluctuating confidence in the nation’s higher education system, US employers across the board continue to maintain that a college degree is valuable.

In the latest employer surveyor from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 70 percent of respondents reported a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education. This was especially true of employers under the age of forty. And while the Gallup poll found that only 20 percent of US Republicans have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education, employers in the AAC&U survey who identify as Republicans reported higher levels of confidence than employers identifying as Democrats or independents. In addition, as they have in previous surveys, employers persist in emphasizing that the broad capacities developed through a liberal education—critical thinking, ethical reasoning, communication, teamwork, and the ability to adapt to new contexts—are, as AAC&U President Lynn Pasquerella puts it, “precisely the qualities most needed to thrive in today’s economy and civic life.”

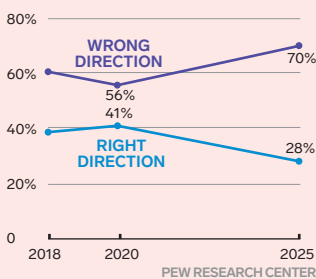
More than one thousand private- and public-sector employers with a job title of manager or higher took part in this latest AAC&U employer survey, conducted in August 2025 in collaboration with Morning Consult. Here we highlight key findings, along with recent data from other surveys about the general public’s views about a college education. (Unless otherwise noted, information is from the 2025 AAC&U employer survey.)



Different takes: general public vs. employers

OVERALL OUTLOOK

A large percentage of the public says that the US higher ed system is going in the wrong direction.

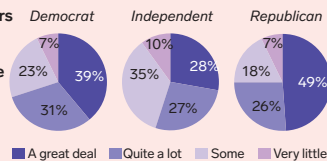


POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

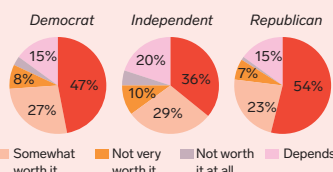
On both sides of the aisle, the general public increasingly says the US higher ed system is going in the wrong direction.



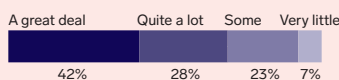
But employers across the political spectrum are confident in higher ed.



Employers of all political views see higher ed as worth the investment.



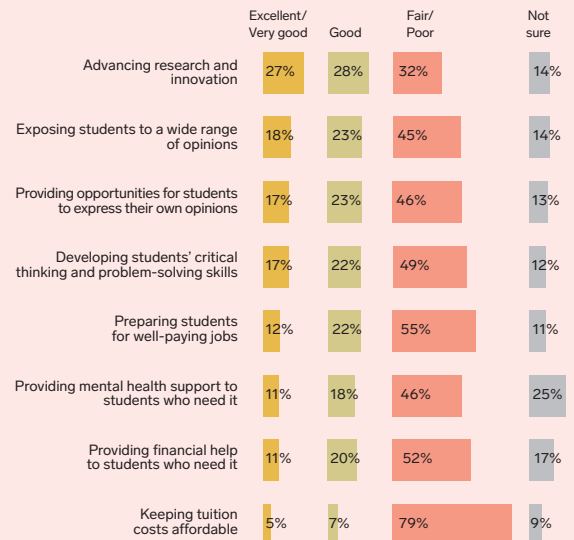
Employers, however, have high levels of confidence in higher ed.



Public report card

More than half of the public says higher ed is doing a fair or poor job preparing students for well-paying jobs.

What the general public thinks when it comes to the job the US higher ed system is doing in the following areas

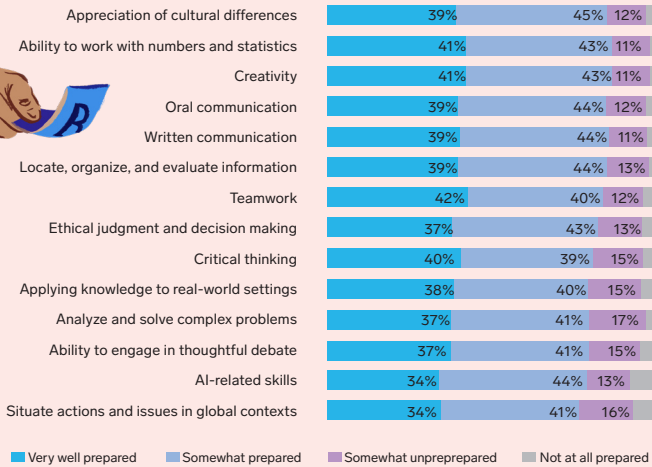


[DEFINITION] A GOOD JOB IS ONE THAT PAYS A FAMILY-SUSTAINING WAGE.

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY CENTER ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE

Employer report card

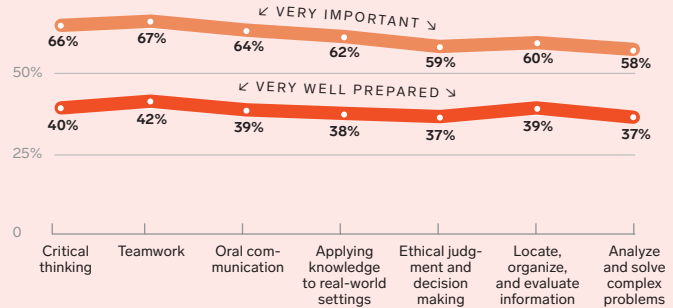
Most employers say higher ed is doing at least a somewhat good job preparing students for careers.



More preparation needed

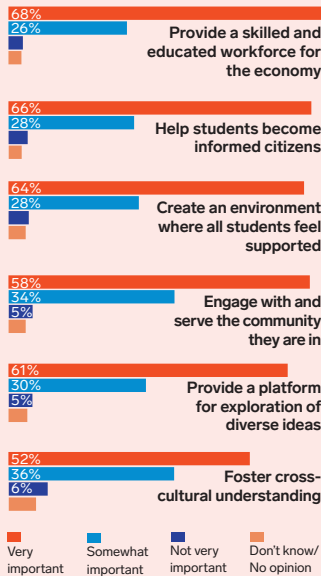
The percentage of executives who evaluated graduates as “very well prepared” was, on average, 10 percentage points higher than hiring managers.

For the outcomes listed below, there is an average gap of 23 percentage points between the percentage of employers overall who view the skill as very important and the percentage who view college graduates as very well prepared in that skill.



Purpose of a college education

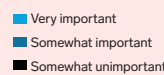
Employers have a far more nuanced perspective on the purposes of college beyond simply feeding workforce needs, with 66% saying it is important that college equips students to “become informed citizens.”



83% of employers think recent college graduates possess the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in entry-level positions and to advance or be promoted. The ability to work in teams and the ability to speak effectively continue to be of high importance to employers.

Skills employers are seeking

In open-ended comments, employers noted the importance of being able to listen attentively and expressed a desire for colleges and universities to provide more real-world experiences for students, such as internships, co-ops, pro bono projects for actual clients, and job shadowing.



Insights into younger employers

Employers under 40 favor students’ exploration of diverse ideas, settings, and cultures, along with engagement in project-based learning experiences. They are also more likely to see higher ed as a worthwhile investment and to have favorable opinions about students’ preparation to succeed in the workforce.

Constructive dialogue

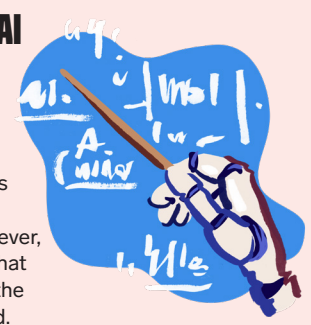
66% of employers indicated it would be “very useful” for graduates to be able to engage in constructive dialogue. While 72% of executives indicated the same, only 64% of hiring managers agreed. Notably, no significant differences by political affiliation were found.

80% of all employers indicated they were at least “somewhat confident” that higher ed is helping students develop constructive dialogue skills, with younger employers, executives, and those identifying as Republican significantly more likely to indicate they were “very confident.”



An eye toward AI

3 out of 5 employers think it is “very important” that college graduates gain skills needed to use AI tools while in college. Only about 2 out of 5, however, are “very confident” that students are getting the preparation they need.

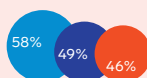


LEARN MORE FIND THE FULL REPORT AT AACU.ORG/2025EMPLOYERS

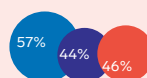
Free to discuss and learn

Overall, more than 4 out of 5 employers support open discussion of topics, respect for diverse perspectives, and learning that is free from government restrictions.

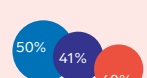
Employers identifying as liberal “strongly agreed” at significantly higher rates than moderates and conservatives that students should have freedom to learn.



All topics should be open for discussion on college campuses.



I would look more favorably upon a degree from an institution known for respecting diverse perspectives.



I would look more favorably upon a degree from an institution free from government restrictions on what students learn and discuss.

■ Liberal ■ Moderate ■ Conservative



→ Employers value high-impact practices and skill attainment. They increasingly appreciate seeing the formalization of those achievements in formats like

ePortfolios and microcredentials.

→ Students and employers stand to benefit when colleges and universities connect the dots between civic skills and career readiness.