

Global Learning Gains Strategic Ground

A new national survey of more than **700 US faculty, staff, and administrators** conducted by AAC&U reveals both optimism and opportunity for higher education leaders. Across institutions, educators see global learning as vital to student success and employability—but few say their campuses have yet made it a fully integrated, workforce-connected priority.

For presidents, this gap is not a crisis of conviction—it is a **strategic opening**. Amid political polarization, funding uncertainty, and demands to demonstrate return on investment, global learning is emerging as a lever for institutional resilience, competitiveness, and student engagement. The challenge is not belief but integration—and the next decade will be defined by which institutions turn conviction into strategy.

Momentum and Opportunity

Across institutional types, educators express confidence that global learning is here to stay. When asked to project the next five to ten years, respondents were most optimistic about the following:

- **Global learning in the classroom (55%)**—signaling strong momentum for curricular integration
- **Career readiness connections (48%)**—growing emphasis on linking global learning to workforce preparation
- **Virtual Exchange/COIL (technology-enabled international collaboration between classrooms) (36%)**—rising interest but uneven awareness of its potential

At colleges and universities where **global internships or applied projects are already scaled**, 85% anticipate continued growth in connecting global learning with career readiness—compared with less than half at campuses with limited or no implementation. These findings show that **institutional investment pays off**: campuses that have already built infrastructure for global learning are best positioned to expand access, while those with smaller footprints can still gain ground through targeted alignment and leadership commitment.

Optimism also signals a shifting definition of global learning itself. Beyond study abroad or traditional exchange, campuses are reimagining how students engage the world—through local-global community projects, employer partnerships, and digital collaboration that extend global learning to students historically excluded from international opportunities.

The Paradox: Belief vs. Practice

While **nine in ten respondents** affirm that global learning strengthens job competitiveness, only **one in ten** describe their institution as having a strong, intentional link between global learning and career readiness. Most characterize that connection as “moderate,” “minimal,” or “not connected at all.”

This **belief–practice gap** reveals untapped potential. It is not a failure of vision but a **missed leadership opportunity**. To strengthen the link between global learning and career readiness, presidents can embed these outcomes within existing accountability structures—such as accreditation standards, general education reform, and workforce metrics. Doing so connects global learning directly to the institutional levers that shape workforce preparation, embedding it in strategy rather than treating it as a stand-alone initiative.

Employer Engagement: The Missing Link

Half of respondents report some form of **employer or industry partnership** related to global learning. Yet only **5%** say those collaborations reach students across departments. Most employer partnerships remain program-specific or reliant on individual faculty champions. Faculty are also more likely than administrators to report such partnerships, revealing visibility gaps that limit coordination and scaling.

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For presidents, these findings point to a **clear and actionable path**: make employer collaboration a visible part of the institutional portfolio. Formalize partnerships that integrate global learning into internships, applied research, and general education courses. Showcase these relationships as evidence of institutional accountability and workforce alignment.

Employer partnerships are **most common at associate's colleges**, reflecting their stronger focus on technical and career education. Other institutional types can adapt these models to scale global learning across disciplines—leveraging existing employer networks to connect global competencies with regional workforce needs.

Experiential Learning: A Common Entry Point

Across all institutional types, experiential learning remains the most prevalent vehicle for connecting the classroom to the world. Internships, applied projects, and collaborative assignments give students tangible ways to apply global perspectives to real-world problems.

These opportunities, however, are most often confined to specific programs, and thus are not available to all students.

Master's and doctoral institutions lead in implementation, while **associate's and special-focus colleges lag**—largely due to limited staffing and resource capacity.

Virtual exchange/collaborative online international learning (VE/COIL) provides one solution. By linking classrooms across borders through structured online collaboration, institutions can expand experiential, intercultural, and career-relevant experiences **without the costs of travel**. For leaders navigating constrained budgets, these models offer scalable, equitable entry points into global learning regardless of institutional type.

Systemic Barriers Across Institutional Types

Despite optimism, respondents consistently identify shared structural barriers:

- **Funding and resource constraints (63%)**—the most universal challenge
- **Leadership support or alignment (39%)**—especially at associate's colleges
- **Time and workload pressures**—particularly acute in smaller or specialized colleges
- **Professional development gaps**—highest in master's and special-focus institutions
- **Institutional silos**—strongest in large doctoral institutions

These challenges are strikingly consistent across faculty, staff, and administrative roles—indicating systemic, not role-specific, obstacles. The key takeaway for leadership: **barriers are shared and so must the solutions be**.

Four Strategic Priorities for Leaders

1. **Close the belief-practice gap.** Build cross-departmental structures that link global learning directly to workforce and institutional outcomes.
2. **Scale what works.** Expand proven models for internships, employer partnerships, experiential learning, and VE/COIL.
3. **Tackle systemic barriers collaboratively**—across leadership, faculty, and staff—to unlock institutional capacity.
4. **Raise internal visibility.** Strengthen communication across departments and divisions to build institution-wide momentum and encourage shared ownership and measurable progress.

A Call to Lead

Global learning remains one of higher education's most unifying and underleveraged strategies for advancing student success and institutional effectiveness. Faculty, staff, and administrators agree on its value—but **belief alone will not build sustainable programs**. The institutions that lead in the next decade will be those that integrate global learning into the very fabric of their operations: tying it to workforce readiness, measuring it through institutional metrics, and scaling it through technology and partnerships.

For presidents, the opportunity is clear: transform conviction into structure, momentum into strategy, and optimism into institutional success.