

THE AGILITY IMPERATIVE: How Employers View Preparation for an Uncertain Future

Amid rapid technological change, shifting workforce needs, and questions about the value of higher education, findings from AAC&U's latest employer survey offer both reassurance and opportunities.

Employers' confidence in higher education remains high.

Despite declining public support for higher education, employers continue to express strong confidence in its value. While only 42% of US adults report having a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, 70% of executives and hiring managers say the same—highlighting a significant perception gap between the general public and the nation's employers.

Moreover, although just 20% of Republicans in the general public express strong confidence in higher education, Republican employers report the highest confidence levels, surpassing both Democratic and Independent employers.

Employers view higher education's roles in workforce preparation and citizenship development as equally important.

Ninety-four percent of employers believe colleges and universities should help students become informed citizens—the same share who say institutions should help prepare a skilled and educated workforce.

Employers highly value, and express strong confidence in, graduates' ability to engage constructively across disagreement. Ninety-six percent of employers say it is useful for graduates to have developed the ability to engage in constructive dialogue across disagreement while in college, and 80% are confident that colleges and universities are helping students develop skills that support constructive dialogue across disagreement in the workplace.

Employers continue to affirm what AAC&U's mission has long emphasized—that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions developed through a liberal education are essential to success in economic and civic life.

Employers continue to endorse a broad range of skills, abilities, and dispositions as essential for workforce success. This now includes the ability to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Though the skills employers seek have strong alignment with curricular learning outcomes, employers' estimations of how well prepared graduates are across skills suggest opportunities for improvement at colleges and universities, including educating students on the use of AI tools.

Employers strongly endorse learning environments that promote open discussion, diverse perspectives, and that are free from government restrictions. This is true of employers from across the political spectrum. However, support for these conditions is strongest among employers who identify as liberal.

Employers seek graduates who can bridge ideas with application, and who can move seamlessly between classroom learning and the demands of a dynamic workplace.

Our challenge—and opportunity—is to help students see how the habits of mind they cultivate in college prepare them not only for their first job but for a lifetime of innovation, resilience, and leadership.

Engagement in hands-on, applied experiences can help students stand out in the hiring process. Employers under the age of 40 are especially likely to value experiences that engage communities, global issues or settings, and project-based efforts.

Employers view electronic portfolios and microcredentials as useful tools for graduates to communicate the breadth and depth of their learning, experiences, and attainment. Nearly half of employers reported that a microcredential from a college or university in partnership with an industry leader is "very valuable" when making hiring decisions.