

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

January 20, 2015

College Students Think They're Ready for the Work Force. Employers Aren't So Sure.¹

By Casey Fabris

Ask soon-to-be college graduates whether they're ready to enter the real world, and they'll probably say yes. After all, they are about to collect what everyone has told them is the ticket to a good job—a college degree. But ask employers the same question, and you'll get a much less optimistic answer.

A [report](#) released on Tuesday by the Association of American Colleges and Universities highlights the discrepancy between students' and employers' views.

The report is based on an online survey of 400 executives at private-sector and nonprofit organizations and of 613 college students (455 seniors at four-year institutions and 158 community-college students who expect to either receive an associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution within the next year). The survey was conducted in November and December by Hart Research Associates.

In addition to comparing views on job readiness, the report covers several other topics, including the extent to which employers value recent college graduates with specific knowledge and broad skills. The study found that a majority of employers feel both are needed for a successful career—something the association agrees with, given its focus on liberal education.

This is the association's fifth employer survey—they typically come out every two years or so—but the first to be paired with a companion survey of soon-to-be college graduates, said Carol Geary Schneider, the organization's president.

The students indicated that they felt qualified in areas like written and oral communication, critical and analytical thinking, and applying knowledge and skills to the real world. But employers consistently rated students lower than they rated themselves. For example, while 59 percent of students said they were well prepared to analyze and solve complex problems, just 24 percent of employers said they had found that to be true of recent college graduates.

The survey is hardly the first evidence that employers don't think college graduates are adequately prepared. A 2014 [study](#) from Bentley University found that both employers and recent college graduates themselves believe graduates are not prepared for their first jobs.

¹ This article is about American institutions, but there is strong evidence to suggest that a similar trend exists in Canada. Food for thought.

A [Gallup study](#) released in the same year found that employers doubt colleges produce students with the skills that meet their needs. And Northeastern University's [Innovation Imperative survey](#), released last April, found that 54 percent of "c-suite executives" think higher education in the United States lags behind that of other countries in preparing students for the work force.

Structural Change in the Economy

Anthony P. Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, traces employers' complaints about the quality of recent college graduates to 1983, when a recession ended and the economy changed rapidly.

At first many economists, Mr. Carnevale included, brushed aside the complaints, reasoning that everyone wants more and everyone wants better in all things. But by the late 1980s, Mr. Carnevale said, data and research on structural change in the economy had proved that it was a real issue. Job demands suddenly became more complex, and employers began expecting new workers to arrive with better skills.

Since then, the demands on colleges have grown at a rate that they can't keep up with, Mr. Carnevale said. "It's not that higher education started doing a lousy job," he said. "It's that what was being asked of them was much more strenuous than it had been before."

In the United States, Mr. Carnevale said, higher education is more than just academic—it's also a job-training system.

The problem, he said, is that colleges don't know how to produce the skills—like problem solving and analytical thinking—that employers expect recent college graduates to possess.

Many skills used to be cultivated in the workplace, Mr. Carnevale said. But less of that is happening now, and at the same time new hires are expected to know more.

Despite the significant discrepancy between employers' and students' views, Ms. Schneider said the survey does hold some good news.

When the organization started conducting focus groups of students roughly a decade ago, most were unaware of the skills that employers were looking for in new hires, Ms. Schneider said. She once observed a focus group in which students were asked whether strong communication skills were an important outcome of college. The students looked at one another for a bit, and ultimately, most answered no. The only one who said yes was a communications major. But things have changed.

Valuing Applied-Learning Experiences

Today there's at least agreement among employers, educators, and students about what skills college graduates need for their first job, Ms. Schneider said.

Students are aware that they need applied-learning experiences, she said. But colleges don't always help them make the most of those opportunities. Students "seek internships, they seek community-based learning, they know they need more opportunities to apply their learning to real-world

situations," she said. "But we don't think they're being guided well on many of those applied-learning experiences."

Colleges should supervise students during such opportunities, Ms. Schneider said, and give them feedback. Her organization plans to announce "far-reaching solutions" to those problems this week in conjunction with its centennial meeting, she said.

Andrew P. Kelly, director of the Center on Higher Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute, agreed with Ms. Schneider, saying employers like to see graduates who've tackled personal and independent projects requiring significant attention and effort. Such projects, he said, can demonstrate dedication and grit.

"You're not aiming for the work to be good enough to get a particular grade," Mr. Kelly said. "You're aiming for the work to be as good as it possibly can be."

Mr. Kelly said he wasn't surprised that students think they are well prepared. After all, he said, many attended college precisely so they could get a good job.

After four or five years of higher education, graduates want to believe they're going to get a return on their investment.

Even if students recognize that college graduates in general are not prepared for the job market, that's not the same as thinking it could happen to them, personally. Everyone expects to be among the group of graduates who do land good jobs, Mr. Kelly said.

For many students, he said, college has become "formulaic and transactional." Students take a class, do the problem sets or papers, take the examinations, and then get the grade. And when students receive A's, they take it as a sign that they're ready for what's next—even though that may not be true.

The gap between how prepared students feel and employers' assessment of them has been established. The question now is what students, employers, and colleges are going to do about it.