

The Importance of Transferable Skills and Work Experience in College Decision Making

Higher Ed Can Meet Workforce Needs

Students and their families want to know their degree has a post-graduation path and it's worth the investment. Higher education "ROI" is consistently in the news, as people debate the value of a degree and researchers attempt to quantify how much a college credential is worth.

Employers seek to hire staff who are ready to contribute to the workforce with both technical training and interpersonal skills to successfully contribute to a team. The value of hiring holistic candidates who bring curiosity and willingness to learn into the workplace drives productivity and economic growth.

Higher education is the confluence of educational aspiration and workforce development needs, and it's successfully done this work for decades.

To best position campus strategy and address these complementary demands, it's critical that leaders **consider how people talk about the value of learning transferable skills and gaining work experience within the college decision-making process**.

Campus Sonar set out to understand this, in partnership with Jeff Selingo and in support of his book, *Dream School: Finding The College That's Right For You* (now available for pre-order).

The social intelligence data

We analyzed more than 600,000 online forum conversations (e.g., Reddit) about the college decision-making process from May 16, 2023–May 15, 2024.

Skills students want extend beyond employability and support economic growth



SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE FINDINGS

What students say is valuable

Our March 2024 research on public trust in higher education found that the public believes the purpose of higher ed is to gain value from the degree. Audiences regularly question the value of post-secondary degrees, whether the outcomes are “worth it,” and what value they gain. Individuals tell their peers online that they expect a degree to provide:

- Diversified career paths
- Increased long-term earning potential
- Specialized skill development
- Larger professional network

These opportunities are only realized when career preparation is embedded in the student experience and included in a campus’s strategic goals.

Nearly 20% of the college admissions conversation was about the skills needed for jobs.

Students were encouraged to:

- Use extra courses, academic services, and resources to gain “employability skills” to help them find a job after graduation.
- Focus on developing practical skills (i.e., critical thinking and social skills) because a degree doesn’t guarantee success.

Students believe transferable skills are valuable for keeping career options open for those who aren't sure what they want out of their future careers. The following skills were referenced often within our dataset.

- Relationship building skills, i.e., networking, persuasive speaking, small group leadership
- Basic math and writing skills
- Study skills
- Interview skills



CAMPUS EXAMPLES

Connect what students want to what employers and governments need

The skills students gain not only make them more marketable and adaptable in a competitive job market, but support economic growth, innovation, and workforce development needs.

For example, in response to labor shortages spanning various sectors in Arkansas, the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith (UAFS) developed the *five Centers for Excellence* to address regional industry goals and workforce needs. The university contributed to an estimated \$142.7 million in economic impact, and continues to explore innovative ways to support the needs of its region.

The ripple effect of the growth is felt across the United States, set in motion by students pursuing an education. Boise State touts an economic impact of \$1.6 billion. For every tax dollar allocated to the university, Idaho taxpayers receive a return of 2.5 times that amount.

In an independent report, it's noted that for every \$1 South Carolina invests in Clemson University (Clemson), the institution generates \$35 in economic output.

UAFS, Clemson, and Boise State illustrate how public institutions can deeply integrate into their local communities, extending the advantages of an educated, skilled workforce beyond individual educational attainment.

Prospective students prioritize internship experience



SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE FINDINGS

What students believe they need

Internships are a common form of workforce training discussed within our dataset. Students highlight the importance of gaining practical work experience to better prepare for future careers, but expressed it's not always clear how to secure these opportunities.

Students seek advice on:

- Obtaining an internship
- Securing a job after graduation
- Exploring alternative careers outside of their major

When making their decision, they consider:

- Campuses that provide greater access to internship opportunities
- Access to a connected network
- Value of an institution's reputation

Some students select schools on the prestige of particular programs to ensure they receive the "best internship and job opportunities."

The primary goal of obtaining a degree is typically to secure a job. In many cases, the path to securing a job isn't always linear. Among students who completed an internship, more than 80% say the experience shaped their preferences for industries and job roles. Across the world, students believe internships help them gain transferable skills, a valuable way for them to keep career options open for those who are undecided on their future career path.

Beyond internships, degree-seeking students rarely discussed other forms of workforce training such as apprenticeships, work-integrated learning experiences, or micro credentials during their college search. It's unclear if this is because students don't learn about these options during college and career advising (lack of awareness), or if they're simply not offered at the types of colleges and universities these students and families were exploring.



CAMPUS EXAMPLES

Employer partnership clarify the job pathway and provide university resources

Institutions with desirable experiential learning opportunities and an active alumni network demonstrate their commitment to helping students secure internships and, ultimately, a job after graduation.

Employers often praise the quality of Utah Valley University (UVU) students and make an effort to hire UVU interns. The campus also partners with Utah-based companies to offer workplace learning. For example, they partnered with Strider Technologies to provide scholarships and fellowships for students pursuing cybersecurity and intelligence careers. Strider views the programs as industry-critical, affirming the value of a UVU degree.

Actionable strategies

Illustrate how education drives economic growth



Highlight degree outcomes.

Students and families want to understand the benefits of a degree, such as increased job prospects, greater employer benefits, higher earning power, social mobility, and marketplace contributions.

Use available data, such as graduation data, job placement data, alumni data, for actionable insights and data storytelling. Collaborate with your alumni team and use their data to inform marcomm strategy and effectively leverage your resources. Storytelling around degree outcomes is also helpful for illustrating how your campus drives regional economic growth to campus leaders, legislators, and the public.



Meet community and business needs.

Assess your regional workforce needs and know how you currently meet those needs.

- Conduct listening sessions with alumni business leaders, large employers, and key employers who hire your graduates to identify their workforce needs.
- Identify growing skill and job needs according to state and federal data.
- Map current program, degree, certificate, and adult education curriculum and offerings to workforce and economic needs and discuss gaps and opportunities.

→ Help students grow their transferable skills.

Employers are increasingly seeking graduates who can contribute technical skills, but also “soft” skills. Infuse transferable skill practice into curriculum and coursework to ensure students learn holistically ahead of graduation.

Invest in career services and career readiness

→ Forge a culture of career preparation.

Build it into your curriculum, coursework, academic advising conversations, and student life experiences. Consider how [stackable credential pathways](#) could be a good fit for your community to support career preparedness for traditional and non-traditional students.

→ Establish mentor relationships.

Establish mentorship relationships across students, faculty, and alumni to create early opportunities for professional networking, connections, and guidance in and out of the classroom.

Prioritize hands-on learning

→ Bridge the gap between current and recent interns.

Students who completed internships don't tell the students coming up behind them what it's like, or how it helped them. Engage recent interns to share their experiences to provide motivation and guidance to prospective students and prospective interns.

→ Build relationships with employers for internships and job placement.

Support student success by tapping into key employers and alumni networks to identify opportunities to build or expand internship opportunities for current students and recent graduates. Review top geographic areas where your graduated students reside and ensure you have employer relationships and internship opportunities in place in those regions.

Read more about the featured campuses

Many of the universities featured here partner with Campus Sonar to understand their audiences, market, and brand and identify actionable insights. [Explore their case studies.](#)