

INSIGHTS FROM A NEW NATIONAL SURVEY

How well is higher education preparing graduates for professional life?

Higher ed leaders give themselves high marks for career prep, but employers, students, and graduates offer a much bleaker assessment

The debate about the value of a higher education degree has intensified. Costs and student debt have exploded, and credentials that take less time and money to attain have emerged as viable alternatives. And now an “enrollment cliff” looms.¹

To counter enrollment declines, colleges and universities have redoubled their efforts to show students they provide a clear path to career success.

But how effective are their career-preparation initiatives?

To find out how higher education leaders assess their career-preparation efforts, Grammarly and Higher Ed Dive surveyed administrators and faculty across the country. More than 200 respondents weighed in on their institutions’ approach to career preparation.

Among the questions the survey considered:

- How do higher ed institutions prioritize student career readiness?
- What career-preparation initiatives have institutions rolled out?
- How are institutions integrating career-preparation efforts into their curricula?
- How have institutions adapted to prepare students for the changing nature of work?
- How effective are these career-preparation initiatives?



At first glance, the survey results look promising. **Nine out of 10** higher ed professionals — and virtually all administrators — said their institutions did an effective job of preparing students to enter the workforce.

But how do we make sense of that finding when headlines such as “Colleges get F for career prep” have gone viral?²

In fact, as this report will reveal, employers, current students, and recent graduates repeatedly say that higher ed does a poor job of preparing students for professional success.

A closer look at the Grammarly/Higher Ed Dive survey results shows that administrators and faculty harbor doubts about their institutions’ career prep, too.

This report digs further into the survey results as well as the latest assessments of employers, students, and graduates. Together, this research points to gaps in higher ed’s career-preparation programs. Institutions confront a disconnect between what they provide and what students and employers expect.

Higher ed administrators can’t afford to ignore these gaps. That’s true even — or especially — if they have confidence in their career-prep initiatives.



Higher ed administrators have a positive view of their career-prep efforts. But how realistic is their assessment?

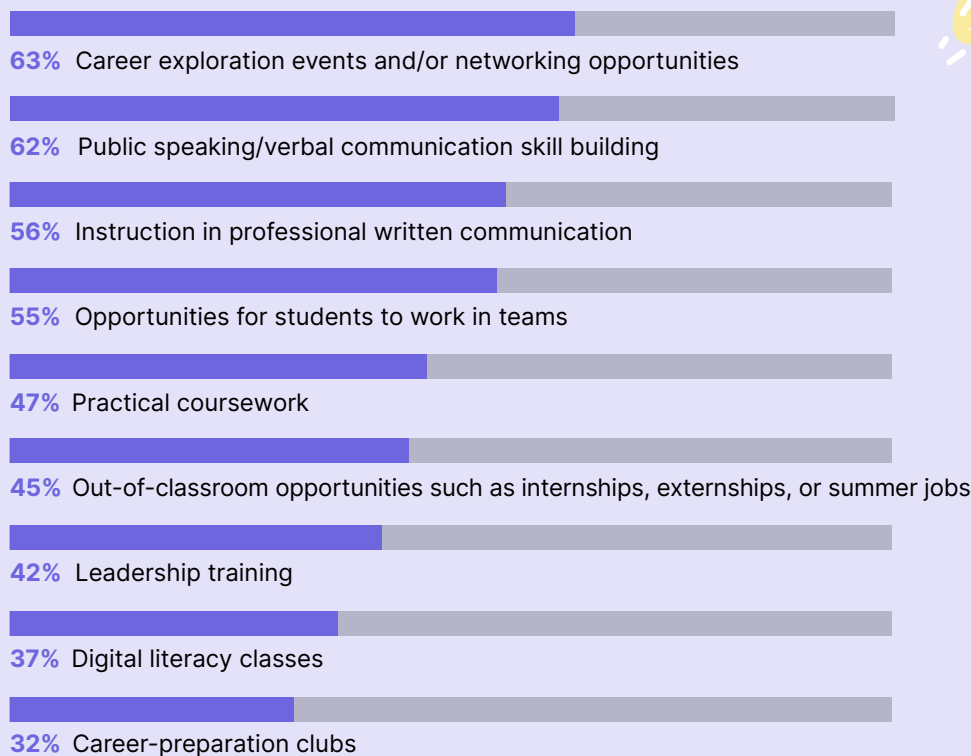
Administrators and faculty clearly recognize the importance of career preparation to students' future success. Almost all (93%) of those surveyed said student career readiness played an important role in their everyday responsibilities.

Respondents also noted that their institutions emphasized career outcomes across departments: 64% said their schools incorporated tools and

technologies students would use in the workforce; 57% reported that they prioritized written communication across departments; and 52% required students to work in teams throughout the curriculum.

In addition, they highlighted a wide range of services their schools offered beyond a dedicated career center — more than four per institution, on average (see callout box below).

Outside of a dedicated career center, how does your institution prepare students to enter the workforce?



“There is no doubt that higher ed administrators and faculty understand the central importance of career prep. And it’s not for lack of effort. The reality is that the more traditional methods of career support that many institutions rely on are no longer effectively meeting the needs of the modern student.”

Mary Rose Craycraft,
Head of Education Customer Success at Grammarly



“There is no doubt that higher ed administrators and faculty understand the central importance of career prep,” said Mary Rose Craycraft, the head of education customer success at Grammarly. “And it’s not for lack of effort. The reality is that the more traditional methods of career support that many institutions rely on are no longer effectively meeting the needs of the modern student.”

How well are these initiatives actually preparing students for life beyond the classroom?

Quite well, if you ask administrators. **Almost all higher ed leaders (98%) rated their schools’ career prep as very or somewhat effective.** Faculty members (87%) were somewhat less bullish but remained positive.

But that doesn’t mean higher ed professionals can declare victory and move on.

To gauge the effectiveness of higher ed’s career-prep initiatives, consider what students, graduates, and employers said.

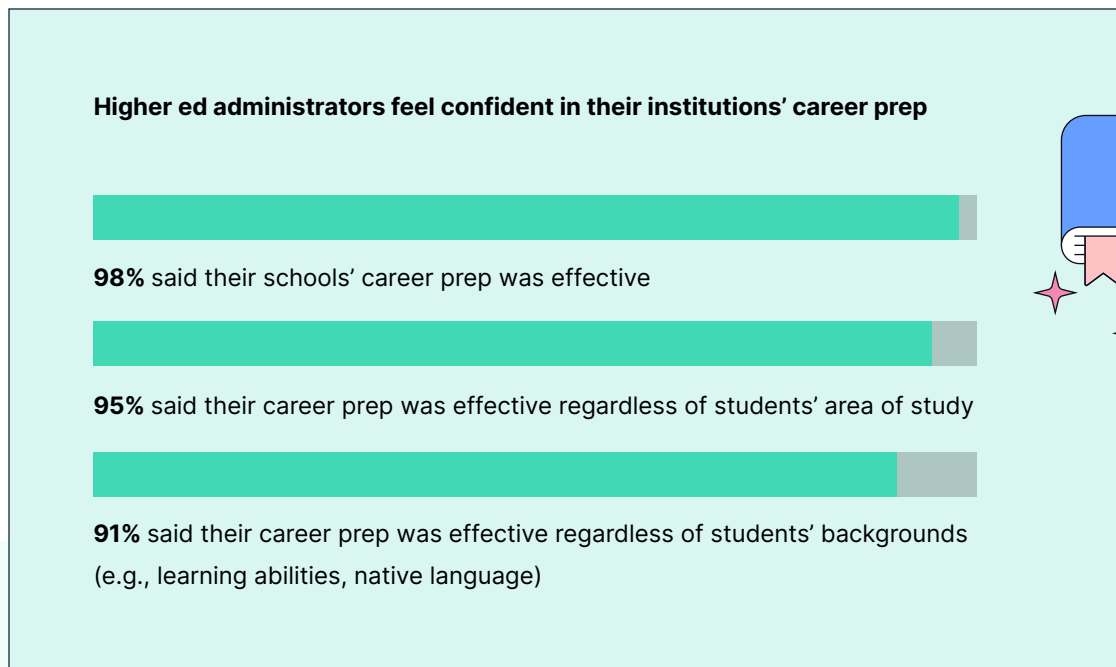
Only 41% of recent graduates said they believed their college degree signaled they had the skills employers needed, according to a recent Cengage Group survey.³ Just 25% said they’d choose the same educational path again.

Current students have raised concerns, too. Only 14% said they had received good service from their campus career center, a College Pulse survey found.⁴

Employers also judge higher ed's career-preparation efforts harshly. Survey after survey reveals that business leaders value the "soft skills" they expect students to learn in college, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork.⁵ The trouble is, they say they don't believe students come out of higher ed proficient in those skills. In 2021, the American Association of Colleges and Universities surveyed business leaders and concluded, "Employers do not believe most graduates possess the level of preparedness needed for workforce success."⁶ An earlier Gallup-Lumina poll put the matter starkly: **Only 11% of business leaders said they believed college graduates were well prepared for the workforce.**⁷

The disconnect is obvious. As the Harvard Business Review explains, "Employers view universities and colleges as the gatekeepers of workforce talent, yet those same institutions aren't prioritizing job skills and career readiness."⁸

Craycraft noted that this disconnect created an opportunity for higher ed. **"Employers often say that colleges and universities aren't preparing graduates properly," she said. "OK, but how so? Let's create a two-way conversation. That way, institutions know what to prepare their students for and how to do it better."**



Higher ed's rosy views hide more nuanced opinions of specific career-preparation initiatives

Although higher ed professionals said they had confidence in their institutions' career-prep programs, they offered more nuanced assessments once they drilled down deeper.

Whereas nine in 10 respondents rated their institutions' career initiatives as effective, only four in 10 (42%) considered them to be "very effective." Here, too, faculty expressed less confidence than did administrators: 37% chose "very effective" versus 48% of administrators.

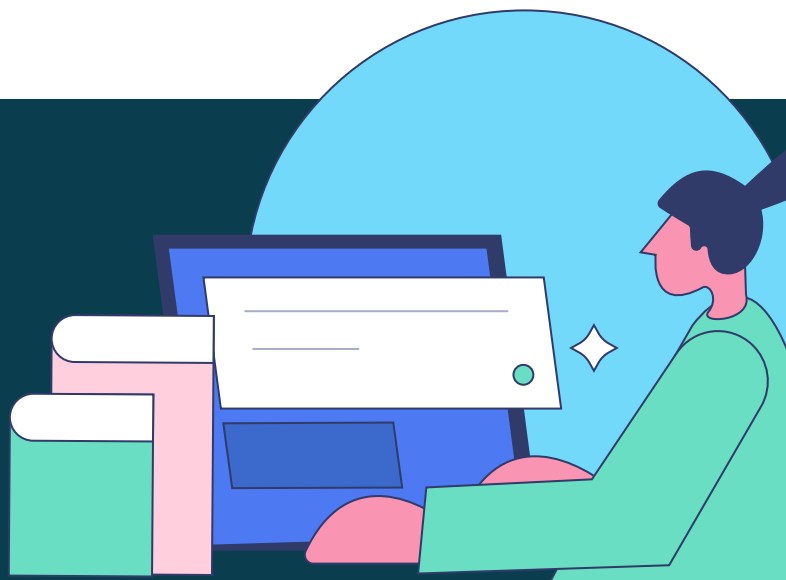
When asked to rate how well the programs work regardless of students' backgrounds or areas of study, only one in three rated them as "very effective." One in 10 say they were ineffective (either "somewhat" or "very").

Nearly half of administrators and faculty conceded gaps in their career-preparation initiatives. For example:

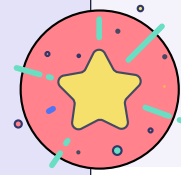
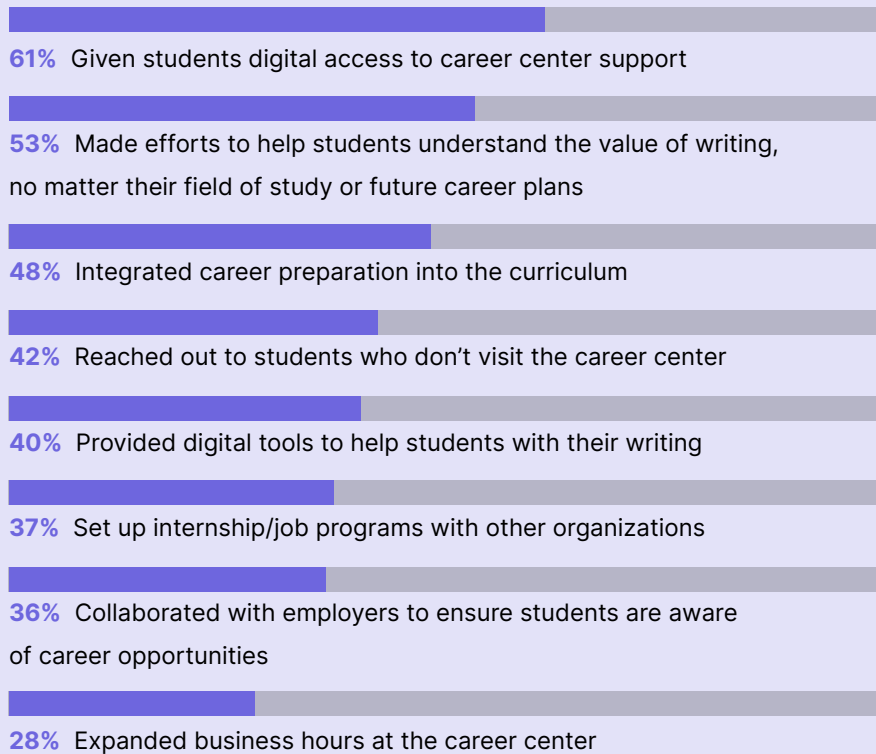
- **48%** admitted that their schools must do a better job integrating career-preparation needs into the curriculum.
- **45%** — including **52%** of faculty — reported that they needed to do more to reach students who don't approach the career center.
- **47%** said students needed help developing their verbal communication skills.
- **42%** — including **47%** of faculty — said they believe students needed help developing their written communication skills.

"Career preparedness is very different from college to college within our university. Some do a great job. One college is spotty. Another is not very good at all."

Administrator at a four-year public university



How has your institution tried to improve its career-preparation initiatives?



Craycraft noted that these mixed assessments, combined with all the different career-preparation initiatives, point to a broader question: How are institutions defining career readiness?

“Career readiness might be woven throughout a student’s academic tenure, but it’s not the focus,” Craycraft said. “Many schools are not aligned on what the actual end goal of their career-preparation programs is. To gain that kind of alignment,

institutions need to commit to defining career-readiness outcomes as a long-term goal.”

A good place to start? Craycraft suggested that administrators reach out to students, alumni, and employers. **“Talk to students and alums to see where they believe the school has missed the mark on career prep. Talk to employers to see what the miss is. Hearing this feedback will make it easier to develop a shared sense of expectations.”**

The most alarming gap: Communication skills

The survey's findings about college students' communication skills proved telling.

Strong written and verbal communication stand at the top of the soft skills employers seek. Nearly 96% of employers cited communication as the most important competency they looked for, according to the 2023 job-outlook report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers.⁹

Here again, though, most employers said it was difficult to find college graduates with the skills they needed.¹⁰

The Grammarly/Higher Ed Dive survey suggests some reasons this may be so.

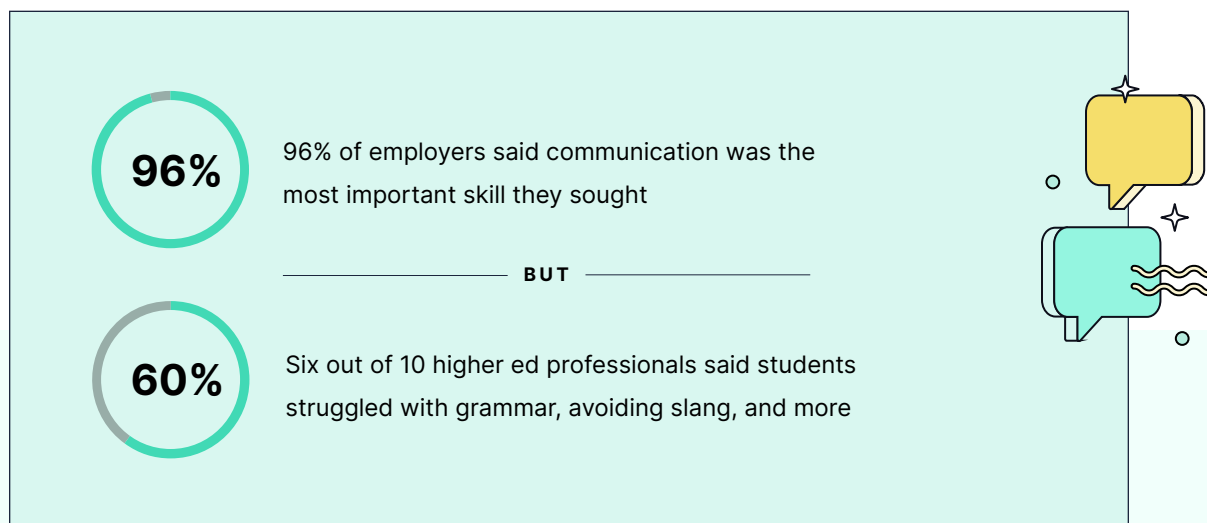
On the one hand, nearly all higher education professionals (92%) agreed with the statement, "My institution views written communication skills as essential for postgraduate success." Moreover, colleges

and universities offer a number of services to help students develop professional communications skills — about 3.5 per school on average, the survey found.

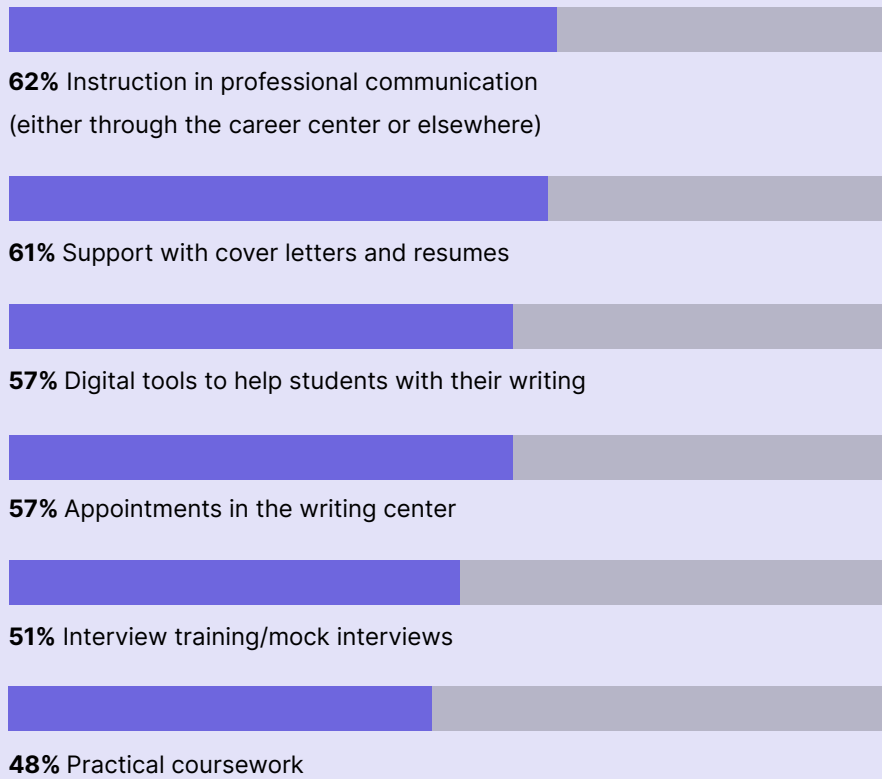
On the other hand, both faculty and administrators acknowledged that these programs had not produced the desired results. More than six out of 10 higher ed professionals agreed that students:

- Had issues with grammar.
- Used text-speak/slang in written communications.
- Struggled to adopt a professional tone.
- Lacked confidence in their writing.

Higher ed can't shoulder all the blame for these struggles. Too many students arrive on campus unprepared for college-level writing.¹¹ When the National Assessment of Educational Progress last measured 12th graders in writing, it found that more than three-quarters lacked proficiency.¹²



What services does your institution offer to help students develop professional communication skills?



“Struggles with writing are a systemic problem that starts well before students get to college,” Craycraft noted. “That said, higher ed’s efforts to address the issue aren’t working as well as they need to.”

Craycraft has been working in higher education for more than 15 years. She sees communication assistance as an area primed for innovation: “Institutions make significant investments in their professors, their writing centers, tutoring programs, and a handful of other measures to improve students’ communication. But even taken together, these

traditional methods of student support can’t close the gaps that exist today. Why not? A big part of it is that the writing center and tutors can’t be there to help all students all the time, whenever and wherever they write.”

Craycraft continued: “To meet students where they are, institutions need to find ways to provide contextual, personalized, timely support so all students can improve their writing skills. There are tools that can provide customized, around-the-clock support in a way instructors simply can’t.”

How higher ed can improve students' career readiness

The results of the Grammarly/Higher Ed Dive survey reveal that higher ed leaders should take a hard look at their career-readiness efforts.

Before launching any ambitious new career-prep initiatives, higher ed leaders need to define their terms: What do they mean by career readiness?

Should students be measured on the soft skills employers value most? If so, which skills in particular — critical thinking? communication? problem-solving? working with others?

“One reason why all of these gaps exist is that there isn't one clear definition of what it means to be career ready,” Craycraft said. “So the term means one thing for an institution but something else for a student and something different for an employer.”

Once an institution has defined what career readiness means, it needs to determine how to measure success. As Craycraft pointed out, “Higher ed provides students with grading rubrics for assignments that clearly define what they're looking for and what it means to get an A. Schools need to set similar expectations for what it means to be career ready.”

The responsibility does not fall on institutions only, though. **“We're constantly asking higher ed to do more,” Craycraft said. “But this is where the two-way conversation with employers becomes so important. The best way institutions can arrive at a clear definition of career readiness is by getting actionable feedback from employers.”**

Craycraft's recommendation mirrors findings from Cengage Group, which notes that employers can help change the conversation around career preparation.¹³



“Higher ed provides students with grading rubrics for assignments that clearly define what they're looking for and what it means to get an A. Schools need to set similar expectations for what it means to be career ready.”

Mary Rose Craycraft, Head of Education Customer Success at Grammarly

Higher education has a wealth of opportunities to strengthen career readiness. Some colleges and universities have rolled out truly innovative approaches to career preparation. Corporations and the federal government have established promising “pathways” programs to identify and train students and recent graduates.¹⁴ Other organizations have emerged to bring employers and education providers together to make education opportunities, including full degrees, available to working Americans.¹⁵

Even if your institution isn’t ready to launch such bold programs, there are other meaningful ways to level up your career-prep initiatives. One of the best places to start is by focusing on ways to meet your students wherever they are and whenever

they need support. Waiting for students to seek help via the career or writing center is no longer a viable strategy.

With AI-powered tools like Grammarly, students can access personalized, timely support that helps them develop the communication skills that future employers demand.

“By helping students develop these enhanced competencies, institutions can make progress in closing the gap that exists in student writing, which will allow them to better compete and succeed in today’s workplace,” Craycraft noted. “This credibility will reflect well and help burnish an institution’s reputation.”



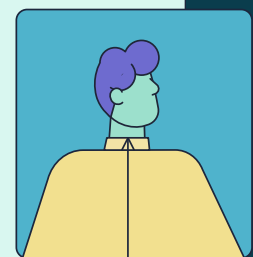
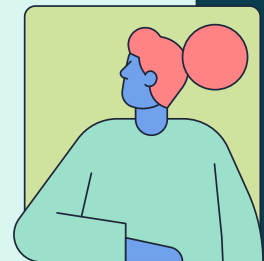
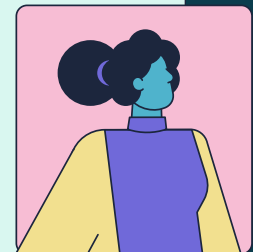


With Grammarly for Education, every student at your institution gains access to an always-on writing assistant, offering suggestions that help students become stronger, more confident communicators and achieve greater academic and professional success.

95% of students using Grammarly report that our tool is helping them to perform better at their first job.

Contact our team to learn more about how Grammarly for Education can help better prepare your students for life beyond the classroom.

[Get in touch](#)



Sources

1. Kevin Carey, "The incredible shrinking future of college," Vox, Nov. 21, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23428166/college-enrollment-population-education-crash>.
2. Alessandra Riemer, "Colleges get F for career prep," LinkedIn News, October 2022, <https://www.linkedin.com/news/story/colleges-get-f-for-career-prep-6028370/>.
3. "(Not) Ready for the Workforce: Today's Graduates Face Stigma and Regret," Cengage Group, May 2022, <https://cengage.widen.net/s/kwsvrrpz6z/cg-employability-survey-report---final>.
4. "Students as Customers on Campus," College Pulse, July 2022, <https://reports.collegepulse.com/students-as-customers-on-campus>.
5. See, e.g., "How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most," Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021, <https://www.aacu.org/research/how-college-contributes-to-workforce-success.pdf>; "Workplace Basics: The Competencies Employers Want," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2020, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/competencies/>; Beth Ryan, "Career Readiness: How to Teach Skills, Not Just Courses," Cengage Group, July 19, 2022, <https://todaylearner.cengage.com/career-readiness-how-to-teach-skills-not-just-courses>.
6. "How College Contributes to Workforce Success." See also Kevin Gray, "Competencies: Employers Weigh Importance Versus New Grad Proficiency," National Association of Colleges and Employers, Dec. 3, 2021, <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/competencies-employers-weigh-importance-versus-new-grad-proficiency/>.
7. Jaimie Francis and Zac Auter, "3 Ways to Realign Higher Education with Today's Workforce," Gallup, n.d., <https://www.gallup.com/education/231740/ways-realign-higher-education-today-workforce.aspx>.
8. Michael Hansen, "The U.S. Education System Isn't Giving Students What Employers Need," Harvard Business Review, May 18, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/05/the-u-s-education-system-isnt-giving-students-what-employers-need>.
9. "Job Outlook 2023," National Association of Colleges and Employers, nacweb.org. See also "Corporate Recruiters Survey: 2022 Summary Report," Graduate Management Admission Council, https://www.gmac.com/-/media/files/gmac/research/employment-outlook/2022_gmac_corporate_recruiters_survey_summary_report_final.pdf; "On the Same Page? Administrator and Faculty Views on What Shapes College Learning and Student Success," American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2022, https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/OntheSamePage_FINAL_2-15-22_pdftoprint.pdf.
10. Dana Wilkie, "Employers Say Students Aren't Learning Soft Skills in College," Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), October 21, 2019, <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/Employers-Say-Students-Arent-Learning-Soft-Skills-in-College.aspx>.
11. Sarah Butrymowicz, "Most Colleges Enroll Students Who Aren't Prepared for Higher Education," PBS, Jan. 30, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/colleges-enroll-students-arent-prepared-higher-education>; Grace Chen, "Why Do 60% of Community College Students Need Remedial Coursework?" Community College Review, March 21, 2022, <https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/why-do-60-of-community-college-students-need-remedial-coursework>.
12. Dana Goldstein, "Why Kids Can't Write," New York Times, Aug. 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/education/edlife/writing-education-grammar-students-children.html>.
13. "(Not) Ready for the Workforce."
14. "Students & Recent Graduates," U.S. Office of Personnel Management, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/students-recent-graduates/>.
15. Hallie Busta, "What employers want from colleges in tuition benefit partnerships," Higher Ed Dive, Nov. 26, 2019, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/what-employers-want-from-colleges-in-tuition-benefit-partnerships/568103/>.

studio / **ID**

BY INDUSTRY DIVE

studioID is Industry Dive's global content studio offering brands an ROI rich tool kit: Deep industry expertise, first-party audience insights, an editorial approach to brand storytelling, and targeted distribution capabilities. Our trusted in-house content marketers help brands power insights-fueled content programs that nurture prospects and customers from discovery through to purchase, connecting brand to demand.

LEARN MORE