

Student and Employer Survey Results on College Learning and Career Success

By Don Sutherland

During the November 13-December 3, 2014 period, Hart Research Associates conducted a [survey](#) of college students who were within a year of obtaining a degree, along with a survey of 400 employers. The survey provided insights into how well students felt colleges were helping them make progress toward their goals and what employers found important in making employment decisions.

The goals for which there were the largest gaps (8 percentage points or more) between the importance students placed on the goals and the extent to which they felt their college experience was helping a lot/fair amount were as follows:

- Making a difference by helping others (11-point gap)
- Being informed about news, events, and developments happening in the United States (10-point gap)
- Voting in elections (9-point gap)
- Getting a good job (8-point gap)

While some of these matters may reflect a difference of perceptions concerning the role of colleges and universities, the first goal has been receiving considerable scrutiny, the second concerns the impact of a liberal education, and the third may well reflect course content that does not adequately relate to contemporary developments. Those are issues that colleges and universities could study further among their own student bodies.

The survey also revealed that students at private four-year institutions were far more confident about finding a job after graduation than those at public four-year schools with 44% of respondents at the private institutions stating that they were very/fairly confident about finding a job after graduation vs. 32% at public institutions.

In focus groups, college students pointed to internships and work-study in helping them make the transition to the workforce. The employer survey corroborated those perceptions. When asked how much more likely select factors would lead them to consider hiring recent graduates, employers placed emphasis on the following experience:

- Internships/apprenticeships with the company/organization: 94%
- Senior project demonstrating problem-solving, knowledge, research, communication: 87%
- Multiple courses involving significant writing: 81%
- Research project done collaboratively with peers: 80%

This data indicated that employers were looking for students who possessed sufficient knowledge, demonstrated an ability apply knowledge and solve problems, could communicate effectively, and had experience in working in groups or teams. Another survey question

confirmed the importance of these skills with 80% or more employers rating the following skills 8-10 on a 10-point Likert Scale:

- The ability to effectively communicate orally: 85%
- The ability to work effectively with others in teams: 83%
- The ability to effectively communicate in writing
- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills: 81%
- Ethical judgment and decision-making: 81%
- The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings: 80%

Put another way, employers were looking for skills that indicated that graduates possessed management potential. The above skills are particularly relevant for a wide range of management and management-related functions. For example, [management analysts](#) require an ability to gather and organize information on problems or procedures, analyze data gathered and develop solutions or alternative methods of proceeding, confer with personnel concerned to ensure successful functioning of newly implemented systems or procedures, develop and implement records management programs, and review forms and reports and confer with management. Over the past five years, employment in management occupations has grown nearly three times as fast as national employment (a 10.2% increase vs. 3.4% for all positions). Excluding management positions, national employment rose 3.1%. Even as employment in management positions increased much faster than total employment, job openings in professional and business services rose nearly 10% faster than total job openings, indicating that management hiring was not keeping pace with the need for such positions.

This data concerning desired attributes among employers, experience employers find valuable, and student job-related goals affirm the importance of bringing together academic programs and student support programs (career services, community services, campus life, among others) to coordinate their activities in a fashion that puts students in their strongest possible position upon graduation. The importance of these activities also presents a possible focus for larger planning, resource allocation, and assessment activities.