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Survey finds that business executives aren't focused on the majors of those they hire

Submitted by Zack Budryk on April 10, 2013 - 3:00am

Business executives care more about their new hires' thinking, communication and problem-solving skills than they do about their undergraduate majors, according to [a survey](#) ⁽¹⁾ being released today by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The association first conducted the survey in 2006, and has done so periodically since then.

The report, entitled "It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success," features the percentage of business executives responding positively to a number of statements, and the results suggest that these employers are not just looking for STEM majors -- or for any one kind of major.

What Employers Want

Statement	Employers who strongly agree	Employers who strongly or moderately agree
Our company puts a priority on hiring people with the intellectual and interpersonal skills that will help them contribute to innovation in the workplace	57%	95%
A candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than undergraduate major	59%	93%
Our company is asking employees to take on more responsibilities and to use a broader set of skills than in the past	52%	93%
Innovation is essential to our company/organization's continued success	51%	92%
The challenges employees face within our company are more complex today than they were in the past	50%	91%

The survey was conducted among executives of 318 nonprofits and private sector organizations in January.

The survey comes amid considerable pressure on many colleges to focus on career readiness. An [Inside Higher Ed survey of parents of pre-college students](#) ⁽²⁾ found many parents see the primary purpose of college as helping to prepare students to find jobs. Many politicians have of late been suggesting that the only way to prepare for a career is to focus on career-related majors.

Debra Humphreys, AAC&U vice president for policy and public engagement, said in an interview that it was hard to precisely compare the 2013 results to that of previous surveys since the methodology had changed. But she added that "the findings from this year's survey pretty much are consistent with what we found in the previous surveys."

According to the survey, Humphreys said, the economic downturn has "put a premium on college graduates who are really multifaceted ... people who have both broad knowledge and skills as well as field-specific skills," a concern she said has "if anything ... gotten even more intense over the years."

Indeed, according to the overview released by AAC&U, "nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) say that 'a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is *more important* than [a candidate's] undergraduate major.'" [emphasis in original]

"Narrow technical skills have a shorter and shorter lifespan, and a lot of employers are ... aware of that," Humphreys added. "[Employers] want evidence [that] graduates have some aptitude in field-specific skills, but what's more important to them is broad, cross-cutting capacity."

In terms of what strategies colleges and universities could use to do bring students more in line with what employers are looking for, Humphreys said, "[employers] want a 'both-and' picture; they want higher education institutions to bring students to an even higher level of ability.... They also want [higher education] to ensure that every college graduate, no matter what their major is, achieves much higher levels of evidence-based reasoning, research skills and complex problem-solving skills [along with] ethical decision-making."

Another important criterion for employers, Humphreys said, is that graduates demonstrate practical experience applying what they have learned.

"Under half of all college students [have an internship] before they graduate," Humphreys said, despite the fact that an internship is "one of best experiences can have on one's resume to sort of a bolster a student's ability to demonstrate that they have the knowledge, and that they have the experience putting the knowledge to use in real-world settings."

The AAC&U also announced the LEAP Employer-Educator Compact, an initiative that aims to "make quality learning a national priority as employers seek college graduates with a broader set of skills and knowledge to fuel our innovation-driven economy." Under this initiative, over 100 college presidents and 100 business leaders will collaborate to work for student access programs that teach the kind of skills employers want.

"Pursuing these shared goals together, we pledge to support programs that prepare students to deal with complexity and to speak out in one voice about making the quality of student learning the touchstone priority for public policy and institutional practice," the compact reads in part. "We urge other college and university presidents and leaders in business, industry, and nonprofit organizations to join us in this compact."

Academically, the agreement calls for institutions to "highlight, support, and expand 21st-century designs for high-quality, hands-on learning, including senior projects, undergraduate research, internships, global and community-based projects and experiences, and other experiential learning programs."

Devorah Lieberman, president of the University of La Verne, said that the compact represented a major step forward for higher education. "What I like so much about this is rather than just higher education operating in its vacuum, saying 'Here's what we do and here's what we do well,' they are working closely with the employers," Lieberman said in an interview. "It's not just in a white paper that we're all putting on a shelf. We're now working closely with our employers, so that we're graduating and educating the employees that they're looking for.... It's turning into much more into a partnership."

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