

# **How Should Colleges Assess And Improve Student Learning?**

Employers' Views On The Accountability Challenge

A Survey Of Employers Conducted On Behalf Of:  
**The Association Of American Colleges And Universities**

**By Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc.**

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*From November 8 to December 12, 2007, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., interviewed 301 employers whose companies have at least 25 employees and report that 25% or more of their new hires hold at least a bachelor's degree from a four-year college. Respondents are executives at their companies, including owners, CEOs, presidents, C-suite level executives, and vice presidents. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 5.7$  percentage points.*

## **Overview**

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Employers are satisfied that the majority of college graduates who apply for positions at their companies possess a range of skills that prepare them for success in entry-level positions, but they are notably less confident that graduates are prepared for advancement or promotion. While recent graduates are seen to demonstrate solid skills in the areas of teamwork, ethical judgment, and intercultural skills, employers are less convinced of their preparedness in terms of global knowledge, self-direction, and writing. Employers' impressions of graduates' preparedness in 12 areas of learning suggest room for improvement across the board, however.

When it comes to the assessment practices that employers trust to indicate a graduate's level of knowledge and potential to succeed in the job world, employers dismiss tests of general content knowledge in favor of assessments of real-world and applied-learning approaches. Multiple-choice tests specifically are seen as ineffective. On the other hand, assessments that employers hold in high regard include evaluations of supervised internships, community-based projects, and comprehensive senior projects.

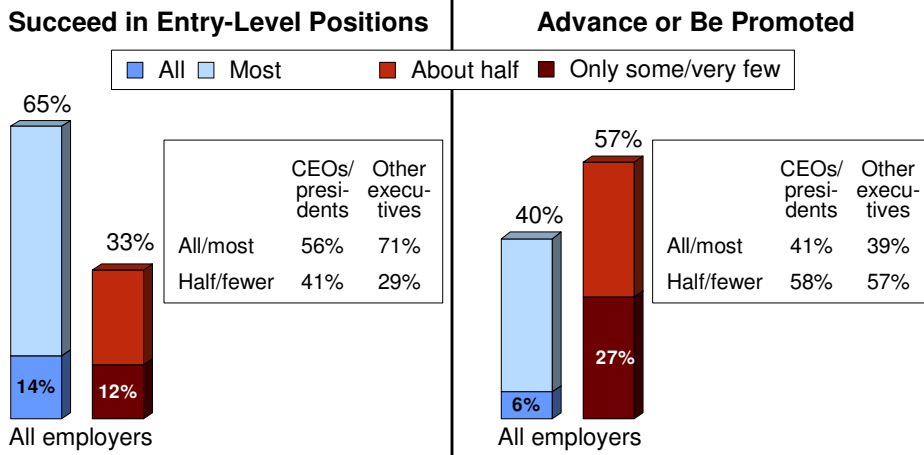
Employers' emphasis on integrative, applied learning is reflected in their recommendations to colleges and universities about how to assess student learning in college. Again, multiple-choice testing ranks lowest among the options presented, just below an institutional score that shows how a college compares to other colleges in advancing critical thinking skills. Faculty-evaluated internships and community-learning experiences emerge on top. Employers also endorse individual student essay tests, electronic portfolios of student work, and comprehensive senior projects as valuable tools both for students to enhance their knowledge and develop important real-world skills, as well as for employers to evaluate graduates' readiness for the workplace.

## Key Findings

**1** Employers have greater confidence in recent college graduates' achievement of the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in entry-level positions at their companies than in graduates' achievement of the skills and knowledge needed for advancement. Nonetheless, even when it comes to preparedness for success at the entry-level, one-third of business executives think that a significant proportion of recent college graduates do *not* have the requisite skills and knowledge. Nearly two in three business executives believe that all (14%) or most (51%) recent college graduates who have applied for positions at their companies have had the full set of skills and knowledge needed to succeed in entry-level positions at their company. That leaves one-third of executives who think that only half (21%) or fewer (12%) applicants have had the necessary skills and knowledge. Interestingly, a comparison of perspectives by title reveals that top-level executives, including CEOs and presidents (56% all/most, 41% half/fewer), feel that notably fewer college graduates have achieved the necessary skills than do lower-level executives (71% all or most, 29% half or fewer).

### Employers See Room To Improve Many College Graduates' Skills/Knowledge

How many recent college graduates who have applied for positions at your company have possessed the skills and knowledge needed to achieve the following within your company?



Little difference of opinion exists between top-level and second-tier executives when it comes to their sense of the proportion of recent applicants who have had the full set of skills and knowledge needed to be promoted within their company—**majorities of both groups think that half or fewer applicants have been fully prepared for advancement.** Overall, two in five employers believe that all (6%) or most (34%) recent

graduates have had the full set of skills and knowledge needed for advancement. Fifty-seven percent (57%) think that about half (30%) or fewer (27%) have achieved this level of preparedness.

**2 Employers believe that college graduates are reasonably well prepared in a variety of areas, but in no area do employers give them exceptionally strong marks. When asked to evaluate recent college graduates' preparedness in 12 areas, employers give them the highest marks for teamwork, ethical judgment, and intercultural skills, and the lowest scores for global knowledge, self-direction, and writing.**

In none of the 12 areas tested does a majority of employers give college graduates a high rating (or "8," "9," or "10") for their level of preparedness. The highest mean score that employers give to college graduates for their preparedness is a 7.0 for teamwork, and they give mean scores of 6.9 for ethical judgment and intercultural skills.

### **Employers Evaluate College Graduates' Preparedness In Key Areas**

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|                        | Mean rating* | Very well prepared (8-10 ratings)* | Not well prepared (1-5 ratings)* |
|------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Teamwork               | 7.0          | 39%                                | 17%                              |
| Ethical judgment       | 6.9          | 38%                                | 19%                              |
| Intercultural skills   | 6.9          | 38%                                | 19%                              |
| Social responsibility  | 6.7          | 35%                                | 21%                              |
| Quantitative reasoning | 6.7          | 32%                                | 23%                              |
| Oral communication     | 6.6          | 30%                                | 23%                              |
| Self-knowledge         | 6.5          | 28%                                | 26%                              |
| Adaptability           | 6.3          | 24%                                | 30%                              |
| Critical thinking      | 6.3          | 22%                                | 31%                              |
| Writing                | 6.1          | 26%                                | 37%                              |
| Self-direction         | 5.9          | 23%                                | 42%                              |
| Global knowledge       | 5.7          | 18%                                | 46%                              |

\*ratings on 10-point scale: 10 = recent college graduates are extremely well prepared on each quality to succeed in entry level positions or be promoted/advance within the company

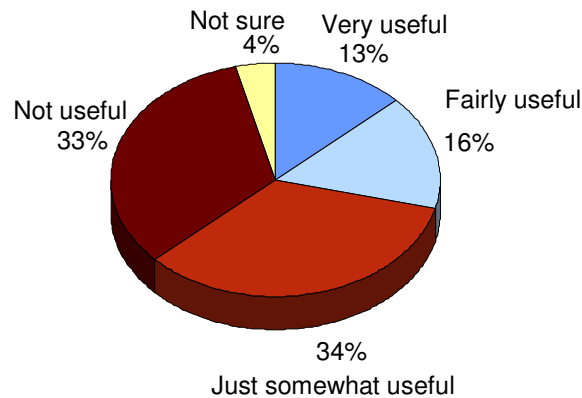
**Employers' feel that the five areas of learning that are listed at the bottom of the chart are most in need of improvement.** At least three in 10 employers give college graduates low scores of one to five for their preparedness in each of following areas: global knowledge (5.7 mean, 46% one-to-five rating), self-direction (5.9 mean, 42% one-to-five rating), writing (6.1 mean, 37% one-to-five rating), critical thinking (6.3 mean, 31% one-to-five rating), and adaptability (6.3 mean, 30% one-to-five rating).

**3** Most employers indicate that college transcripts are not particularly useful in helping evaluate job applicants' potential to succeed at their company. Fewer than three in 10 employers find college transcripts very (13%) or fairly (16%) useful, while two in three think that transcripts are just somewhat (34%) or not useful (33%). No matter their position or the size of their company, employers indicate that the college transcript does not provide them much help in assessing college graduates' potential for success.

### Employers Find College Transcripts Of Limited Use In Evaluating Potential

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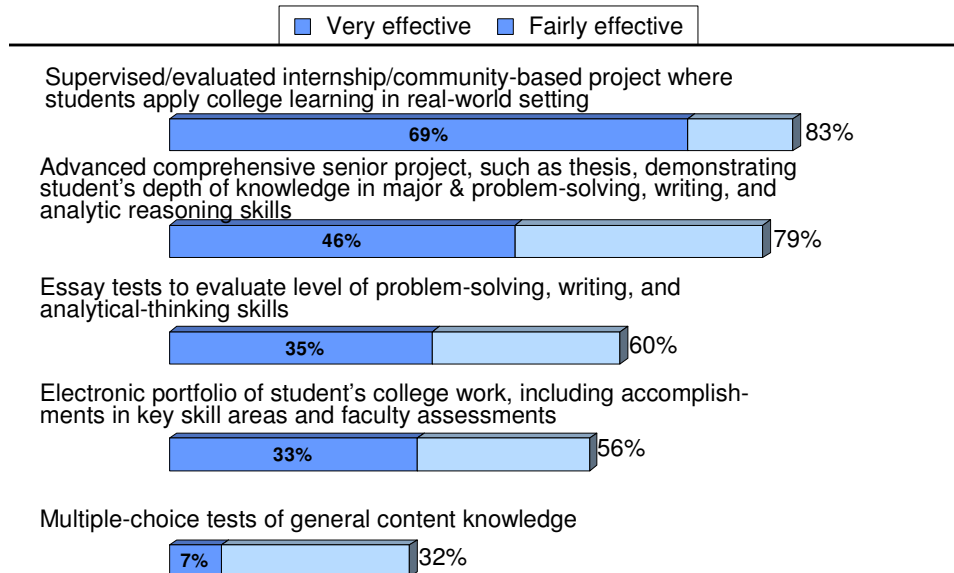
How useful do you find the college transcript in helping you evaluate job applicants' potential to succeed at your company?



**4** Few employers believe that multiple-choice tests of general content knowledge are very effective in ensuring student achievement. Instead, employers have the most confidence in assessments that demonstrate graduates' ability to apply their college learning to complex, real-world challenges, as well as projects or tests that integrate problem-solving, writing, and analytical reasoning skills.

More than four in five employers believe that completion of a supervised and evaluated internship or community-based project would be very or fairly effective in ensuring that recent college graduates possess the skills and knowledge needed for success at their company. With 69% of employers saying this type of assessment would be very effective, they clearly think that supervised and evaluated internships would have the greatest impact on student achievement of the five assessments tested.

## Assessments' Effectiveness In Ensuring College Graduates Have Skills/Knowledge



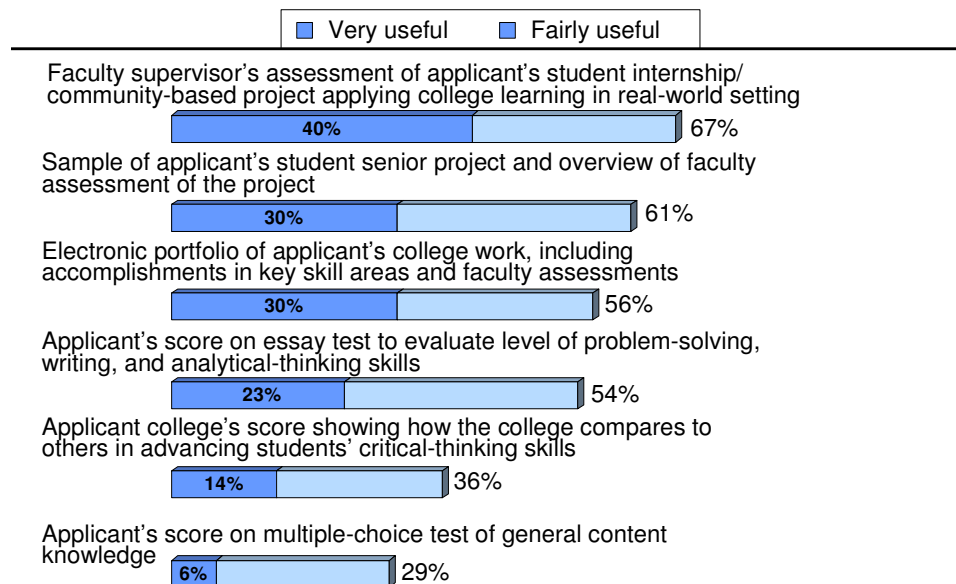
Nearly four in five business executives also endorse completion of a senior project that demonstrates depth of knowledge in the students' major and problem-solving, analytic, and reasoning skills as a very (46%) or fairly effective (33%) way of ensuring college graduates' attainment of necessary skills and knowledge.

Solid majorities give similar weight to completion of essay tests that evaluate problem-solving, writing, and analytical-thinking skills (60% very/fairly effective) and electronic portfolios (56% very/fairly effective) as means for ensuring student achievement.

The only assessment that receives low scores from the majority of employers is the idea of requiring college students to complete multiple-choice tests of general content knowledge. Just one-third of business executives think that these tests would be very or fairly effective in ensuring that recent college graduates possess the knowledge and skills necessary for success at their company. A mere 7% think they would be very effective, while fully 69% have the same level of confidence in supervised and evaluated internships.

**5** Employers deem both multiple-choice tests of general content knowledge and institutional assessments that show how colleges compare in advancing critical-thinking skills of limited value for evaluating applicants' potential for success in the workplace. They anticipate that faculty-assessed internships, community-based projects, and senior projects would be the most useful in gauging graduates' readiness for the workplace.

## Assessments' Usefulness In Evaluating College Graduates' Potential For Success



When asked separately about the usefulness of different assessments in evaluating whether a college graduate possesses the skills and knowledge needed to be successful at their company, business executives feel that a faculty supervisor's assessment of an internship or community-based project would be most useful (67% very/fairly useful). In this question, employers were asked their views on five assessments included on the preceding graph, as well as an institutional assessment that provides a score for the student's college that shows how the college compares to others in advancing critical-thinking skills. Employers' ranking of these assessments in terms of their usefulness parallels their ranking of the assessments' effectiveness in ensuring student achievement of skills and knowledge.

In addition to endorsing assessments of internships and community-based projects, more than half of employers think that a faculty-assessed senior project (61% very/fairly useful), an electronic portfolio that includes relevant faculty assessments (56% very/fairly useful), and a score on an essay test (54% very/fairly useful) would be useful. Business executives anticipate an applicant's score on a multiple-choice test (29% very/fairly useful) and an institutional score for the applicant's college (36% very/fairly useful) to be

the least helpful in their evaluation of job applicants. (Employers put multiple-choice tests on par with college transcripts for their usefulness in evaluating college graduates' potential for success at their company.)

**6** When asked to advise colleges on how to develop their methods for assessing students' learning, employers rank multiple-choice tests of students' general content knowledge and institutional scores for colleges as conspicuously low priorities. Employers were asked to choose the two practices they would most recommend colleges devote resources to develop. The corresponding graph reveals that a mere 5% select multiple-choice tests of general content knowledge, and only 8% choose tests that show how a college compares to other colleges in advancing students' critical thinking.

Overall, employers are most likely to select faculty-evaluated internships or community-based learning experiences (50%) as one of the assessments that colleges should devote resources to develop. Essay tests that measure problem-solving, writing, and analytical-thinking skills (35%), electronic portfolios that include examples of students' work and faculty assessments (32%), and faculty-evaluated, comprehensive senior projects (31%) all form a second tier of recommended areas of focus for assessments of student learning.

## Employers Advise Colleges Where To Focus Resources To Assess Student Learning

One/Two Practices To Which Colleges Should Devote Resources

|                                                                                                                                                                    | All Employers | CEOs/<br>Presidents | Other Executives |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Faculty-evaluated internships or community-based learning experiences                                                                                              | 50%           | 44%                 | 54%              |
| Essay tests that measure students' problem-solving, writing, and analytical-thinking skills                                                                        | 35%           | 40%                 | 32%              |
| Electronic portfolios of students' work, including examples of accomplishments in key skill areas and faculty assessments of them                                  | 32%           | 28%                 | 34%              |
| Faculty-evaluated comprehensive senior projects demonstrating students' depth of skill in major & advanced problem-solving, writing, and analytic-reasoning skills | 31%           | 26%                 | 34%              |
| Tests that show how a college compares to others in advancing students' critical-thinking skills                                                                   | 8%            | 6%                  | 9%               |
| Multiple-choice test of general content knowledge                                                                                                                  | 5%            | 7%                  | 4%               |



Interestingly, even though CEOs/presidents and lower level executives give similar ratings for the effectiveness and usefulness of these assessments, CEOs and presidents are equally likely to emphasize the importance of developing both faculty-evaluated internships (44%) and essay tests (40%), while lower level executives have a clear preference for colleges to focus first on developing internships. Neither group endorses increased investment in multiple-choice tests of general content knowledge or institutional scores of critical-thinking skills.