

Tests Aren't Best Way to Evaluate Graduates' Skills, Business Leaders Say in Survey

By [PAULA WASLEY](#)

American business leaders think that college graduates should arrive at the nation's work places with real-world skills. But a new survey released on Tuesday by the Association of American Colleges and Universities reveals that many employers believe today's applicants are not ready to advance within their corporations. Worse still, employers have little use for some of academe's more traditional assessment indexes of student achievement and preparedness, including standardized tests and college transcripts.

The association asked 301 employers whose companies have at least 25 employees and whose new hires include at least a quarter with bachelor's degrees or higher about the level of skills and preparedness they expected from college graduates—and also what colleges could do better to assess student achievement. The survey was conducted in November and December as part of the association's continuing Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative, or LEAP, which was started in 2005 to promote liberal education and establish a set of core learning outcomes for all college students.

The association found that a majority of the executives surveyed were reasonably confident that most recent college graduates who applied for positions at their companies had the necessary preparation to succeed at entry-level positions. But a third of the executives thought only half or fewer of such applicants were sufficiently prepared. Top executives were found to be more skeptical of the applicants' skills than were lower-level executives.

A majority of those surveyed also had doubts about those new hires' long-term prospects. Executives at all levels said that half or fewer of job applicants from four-year institutions had the skills and knowledge required to advance in their companies.

Employers thought the graduates who applied for positions at their companies were best prepared in the areas of teamwork, ethical judgment, and intercultural skills. But they said applicants needed to improve considerably in the areas of global knowledge, self-direction, and writing skills.

Frustration With Colleges' Assessments

When asked what learning approaches and assessment methods companies valued most in evaluating a new hire's potential for success, employers overwhelmingly favored integrated, applied-learning experiences like faculty-supervised internships, community-based projects, and comprehensive senior projects. They ranked those experiences just

above essay tests and electronic portfolios of student work, which they said were also helpful in demonstrating an applicant's analytic, problem-solving, and writing abilities.

Only 29 percent said that college transcripts were either very or fairly useful to them in assessing an applicant's skills and knowledge. At the very bottom of the heap were multiple-choice and general-knowledge tests, which most business executives dismissed as ineffective means of assessment.

Colleges, they said, should develop methods to assess students' preparedness to apply what they are learning to real-world settings, and to place less emphasis on multiple-choice tests of general knowledge.

"This isn't a multiple-choice world," Wayne C. Johnson, vice president for worldwide university relations at Hewlett-Packard, said in a telephone news conference on Tuesday. The findings, he said, reflect a frustration and sense of urgency among businesses, which, he said, have increasingly had to look overseas to find qualified employees.

"It would be far wiser for our nation to invest in the areas of the economy that are growing fastest and prepare students for contribution to that growth," he said. "This requires that all workers be educated at a higher level of achievement."

Adding to the Debate

According to Carol Geary Schneider, the association's president, the latest survey findings add a new wrinkle to the debate over accountability and assessment in higher education that followed from the 2006 report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, established by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

The commission's call for a more open system of comparing students' progress through college took for granted that academe and the testing industry already had effective means to assess student learning, said Ms. Schneider. The LEAP survey, she said, suggests a need to devise alternative assessment methods that better measure students' real-world skills, particularly in areas such as global knowledge, self-direction, and intercultural competence.

"This research shows why employers are so worried about underachievement in college," Ms. Schneider said in a written statement. "But it also shows that employers have no faith in some of the assessment practices that were recommended in the Spellings Commission report and that are now being adopted by many public institutions."

The [full report](#), "How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning?" is available on the association's Web site.

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