Forging Partnerships
to Align Education and Industry for the Workforce of Tomorrow

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Letter From Our Board Chair

As an executive at the forefront of driving technology transformation in leading tech companies like Cisco, Oracle and Microsoft, and now as President & CEO of Ellucian, a leading EdTech company, and Executive Chair of the Business-Higher Education Forum—I've witnessed firsthand how technological disruption reshapes the workforce. It has never been more imperative for education and employers to join forces to build a future-ready workforce equipped to adapt, innovate, and lead.

The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) serves as a vital hub for distinguished leaders, innovators, and change-makers. Positioned at the intersection of education and industry, BHEF fosters meaningful collaboration between higher education institutions and business leaders to ensure that every learner is prepared to thrive in a rapidly evolving workplace. Now more than ever, BHEF's mission is critical. By advancing bold new models and forging impactful partnerships, we are committed to shaping a workforce that will meet the demands of tomorrow's economy.

Laura Ipsen*, President & CEO, Ellucian*

Letter From Our CEO

Emerging technology is reshaping the way all of us learn and work. We must prepare for a future that requires both highly technical skills and distinctly human skills. Collaborative efforts to swiftly understand, translate, and construct inclusive systems that address emerging and persistent talent needs are essential to ensure we are upskilling and preparing the future workforce.

The Business-Higher Education Forum is the only national organization that is exclusively focused on bringing business executives and college and university leaders from across sectors together to build strong and inclusive pathways between education and work. By harnessing our collective power, we can create an educated workforce that supports individual economic mobility, inclusive economic participation and growth, and global competitiveness. All Americans seek a viable route to economic prosperity for themselves and their children and this close partnership across business and education leaders is essential to ensuring our diverse, scaled network of higher education institutions is an engine of economic mobility delivering on this vision.

I thank our business and higher education leaders, funders, and partners who are working to build the future of work and education. With urgency and commitment, we are aligning and scaling solutions to meet the evolving talent needs of learners, workers, and businesses. I am grateful for the partnership and leadership of our network as we roll up our sleeves and come together to help those learners, businesses, and the nation at large successfully prepare for and navigate not only the work of today but also the work of the future.

Kristen Fox*, CEO, Business-Higher Education Forum*

Introduction

As the economy transforms and skills evolve at an unprecedented pace, the need to create inclusive education and talent pathways that connect learners and workers to the professions of the future has never been more urgent. Those professions, as noted by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, require advanced education and training. Already, the American economy has more jobs than qualified people to fill them, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The misalignment between educational ecosystems (the supply of talent) and our employment ecosystems (the demand for talent), however, prevents the effective and inclusive connection between talent and opportunity.

Education and industry simply must work together to ensure the workforce of tomorrow is prepared for the high-growth roles vital to driving economic momentum and innovation. The speed of change is staggering: the World Economic Forum has predicted that 44% of the skills that employees rely on today will be disrupted within the next five years. To keep up, the American postsecondary education system must not only deliver high-quality, relevant education but also establish flexible partnerships with business to align talent pipelines directly with market needs. To build the skilled, diverse workforce our nation needs and fuel a dynamic and inclusive economy, our postsecondary education system must be mobilized as a scalable and adaptable engine of growth. That engine will generate opportunities and forge connections that reach across regions, industries, and demographics—driving economic resilience and inclusive growth.

*The World Economic Forum has predicted that **44% of the skills that employees rely on today will be disrupted within the next five years.***

To support higher education, business, nonprofit, and government leaders in achieving that vision, the Business Higher Education Forum (BHEF) conducted its first annual State of Skills and Partnerships Research Study (SSPRS). The study identifies the critical challenges and opportunities in today's education and talent landscape and provides insight into effective partnership solutions. Drawing on insights from nearly 400 business leaders and more than 200 education leaders, this report highlights pressing workforce challenges and emphasizes the need for enhanced collaboration between business and higher education to address skill shortages and prepare for rapid technological advancements.

It also identifies several significant disconnects in three different types of current workforce skills:

1. **DURABLE SKILLS** are human skills—such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork—that are highly sought after but in short supply. Notably, **62% of business respondents report difficulty finding entry-level talent proficient in durable skills.** Employers most often cite critical thinking and problem-solving as the top durable skills needed for success in today's roles. Yet many new graduates lack these competencies, creating a barrier to workforce readiness.

2. **BUSINESS SKILLS** are cross-disciplinary professional skills that most employees need to have. As many as **65% of employers struggle to find candidates with these essential digital literacy and data proficiency skills**, such as using productivity software, analyzing data, and navigating generative AI tools. Generative AI is emerging as a critical competency, with more than one-third of business leaders identifying it as among the top three skills for future roles. Although requirements for competencies in AI are only beginning to appear in job postings, the anticipated demand underscores the need for immediate investment in AI education for employees across all business sectors.

3. **TECHNICAL SKILLS**, especially in IT and data science, present challenges, as well; **66% of employers report difficulties sourcing talent with the necessary technical expertise for current and growing roles.**

These data points reflect the need to align educational programs with industry needs to ensure a workforce prepared for the rapidly evolving job market. Yet education can't make that happen alone. In fact, 89% of business leaders believe they have a responsibility to invest in higher education and talent development, with a primary focus on upskilling and reskilling their workforce.

Industry-specific priorities for higher education partnerships vary, however. Leaders in trades emphasize affordable

credentials, while those in healthcare, finance, and IT prioritize coaching and mentoring access. Retail industry leaders focus on diversifying recruitment pipelines. For their part, higher education leaders generally concentrate their priorities for business partnerships on career readiness, skills alignment, and experiential learning, but differences exist among institutional types For instance, two-year institutions emphasize employer engagement in curriculum development and workforce training more than four-year institutions do.

Such insights suggest that customized partnerships can better meet the distinct workforce needs of various industries and institution types. But leaders in both business and higher education cite a number of challenges to building such partnerships, including differing goals, resource constraints, and a lack of the necessary infrastructure for skills alignment and communication.

BHEF recognizes that, foundationally, partnerships require strong leadership and structured governance, effective communication and processes, and a commitment to continuous improvement. To overcome common challenges and other roadblocks, this report offers the following recommendations:

- **Pursue transparency on goals and build trusting relationships.** Strong alliances thrive when partners operate with trust, openness, dedication to advancing each other's success, and a foundation built on a sustainable, mutually beneficial business model.
- **Leverage third-party assistance.** Data from this study show that high-performing partnerships are more likely to engage in a workforce development initiative or receive support from an intermediary organization.
- **Streamline and invest in partnership functions.** The creation of an external-facing partnership function, backed by clear points of contact and resources to support it, can enable high-performing partnerships to thrive.
- **Establish a consensus on skills definitions.** A common language across higher education and industry enables organizations to communicate skills more consistently and effectively.
- **Advance skills-assessment methods and integrate them into core processes.** Improved methods of assessing skills—applicable both in higher education for evaluating student development and within businesses for assessing workforce capabilities—will enhance alignment between educational outcomes and workforce needs.

In addition, it's important to emphasize the role that technology plays as an enabler in both skills acquisition and partnership management. By collectively strengthening partnerships, businesses and higher education institutions can address any skills gaps more quickly and adapt to the rapid changes in today's workforce, thereby fostering America's long-term success and competitiveness.

The Skills That Matter Most

Effective partnerships between business and higher education strengthen the talent pipeline, ensure learners are equipped with in-demand skills that businesses value, and create a clear pathway from the classroom to the workforce. But identifying critical skill gaps is challenging. Businesses often find it difficult to articulate and translate their needs to higher education institutions, and higher education institutions often face hurdles adapting curriculum quickly enough to meet evolving labor market needs.

As the world grows more globalized and digitized, skills that were once industry-specific increasingly cut across various fields. In fact, this trend is already evident in what employers are signaling through job postings that list the skills they are seeking in the people they want to hire.

In our research, we found the skills that matter most to employers fall into three categories:

DURABLE SKILLS
Cross-disciplinary skills that are also referred to as human or soft skills and broadly valued in the workplace. They include critical thinking, communication, and teamwork.

BUSINESS SKILLS
Cross-disciplinary, general yet more technical skills that most employees need, including those for analyzing data and digital proficiency—such as using Microsoft Office Suite and generative AI tools.

TECHNICAL SKILLS
Skills that demonstrate specialized knowledge and expertise needed to perform certain tasks and some are associated with careers in STEM. They typically require specific domain knowledge and include computer programming, blueprinting, and financial modeling, as well as creating AI algorithms.

FIG. 1 **Business Leaders' Perception of Talent and Skills Challenges**

My industry has a challenge finding and equipping talent with the skills needed for today's workplace.

■ Disagree/Strongly Disagree   ■ Neutral   ■ Agree /Strongly Agree

	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly Agree
My industry	19%	19%	62%

Finding entry-level talent with ____ is a challenge for my company.

	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly Agree
BUSINESS SKILLS	21%	14%	65%
DURABLE SKILLS	21%	17%	62%
TECHNICAL SKILLS	18%	16%	66%

Note: N=380 business leader responses. Fig. 1 shows the percent of business leader respondents who select statement. Survey Question: "Please rate your agreement with the following statements as it pertains to skill shortages: Finding entry-level talent with business skills is a challenge for my company; Finding entry-level talent with soft or durable skills is a challenge for my company; Finding entry-level talent with the technical skills needed for emerging occupations is a challenge for my company; My industry has a challenge finding and equipping talent with the skills needed for today's workplace."
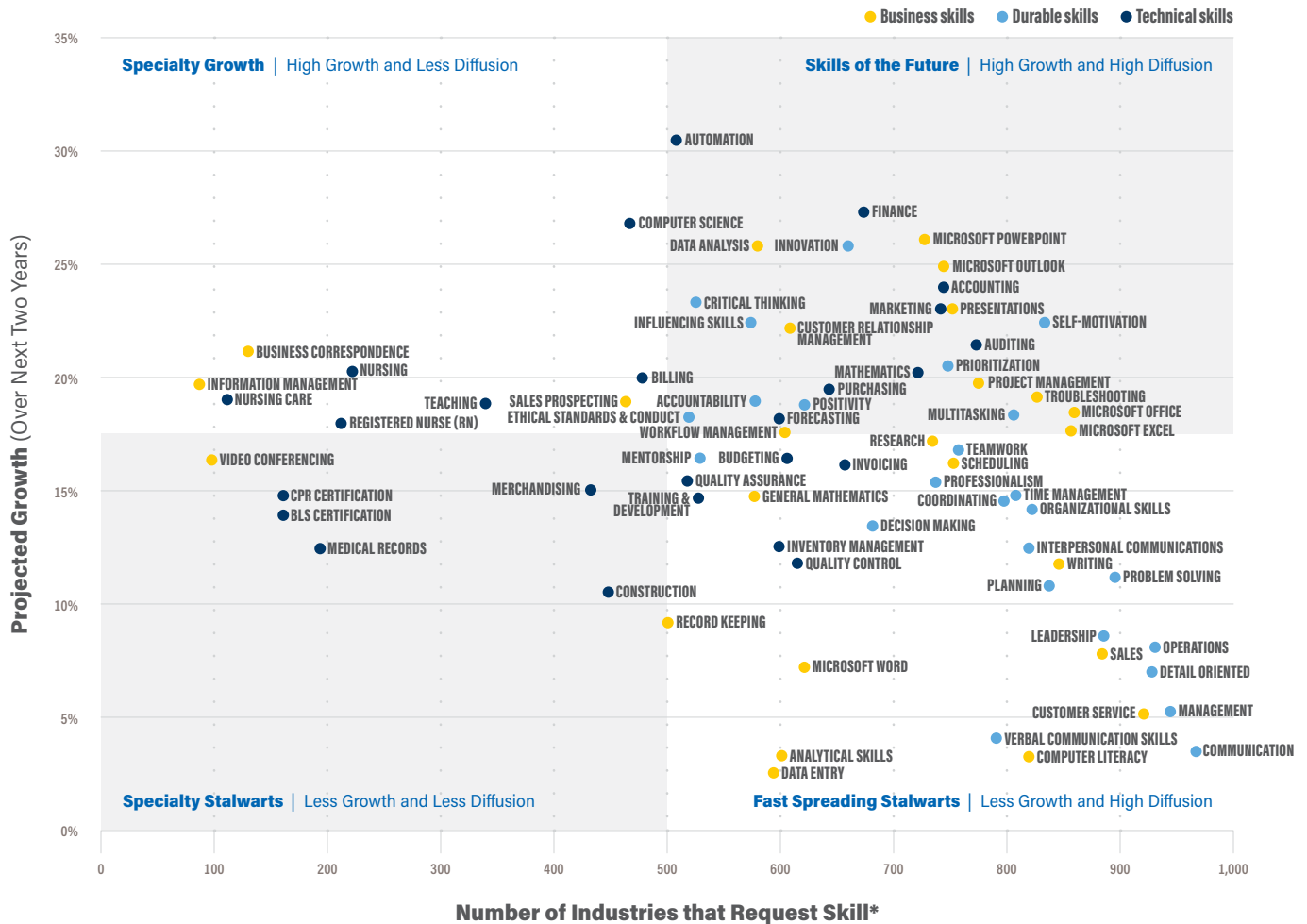**Source**: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Durable skills have long been considered foundational to workplace success for any occupation or industry. Data on job postings highlight a rising demand across industry sectors for digital literacy skills, or what we call essential business skills, like analyzing data, applying software tools, and managing projects. As shown in figure 2, these skills were once specific to certain occupations but are now essential at a foundational level for all types of fields, jobs, and roles. Technical skills requiring specialized knowledge, such as finance and computer science, are also spreading across industries—though to a lesser degree than durable and business skills.

These key skills—which bridge industries and occupations, especially those projected to grow in demand—will impact all employers and the individuals in their workforces. Targeted and aligned education in these areas is crucial for supporting

people's ongoing professional success and mobility and for ensuring that the workforce of the future is prepared.

That said, the required proficiency and ability to apply those skills will vary by industry. For example, AI will affect all industries, but different fields will require different levels of proficiency and specialization when it comes to using AI for marketing or building algorithms or to applying it ethically. In other words, the data derived from what employers are signaling in job postings tells only one part of the story. They often don't reveal industry-specific skills needs and proficiencies or company-specific tools and platforms, such as coding languages, or whether Google Suite vs. Microsoft Office is preferred. Gaining that type of information requires engagement and validation from employers and consistent collaboration between business and higher education.

FIG. 2 **Projected Skills Growth Versus Industry Diffusion** by Skill Type

Legend: ● Business skills   ● Durable skills   ● Technical skills

Specialty Growth | High Growth and Less Diffusion
Skills of the Future | High Growth and High Diffusion
Specialty Stalwarts | Less Growth and Less Diffusion
Fast Spreading Stalwarts | Less Growth and High Diffusion

Y-axis: Projected Growth (Over Next Two Years) — 0% to 35%
X-axis: Number of Industries that Request Skill* — 0 to 1,000

Note: Based on top skills by number of job postings over past year for each skill type, *Number of 6-Digit NAICS Industries that Request Skill
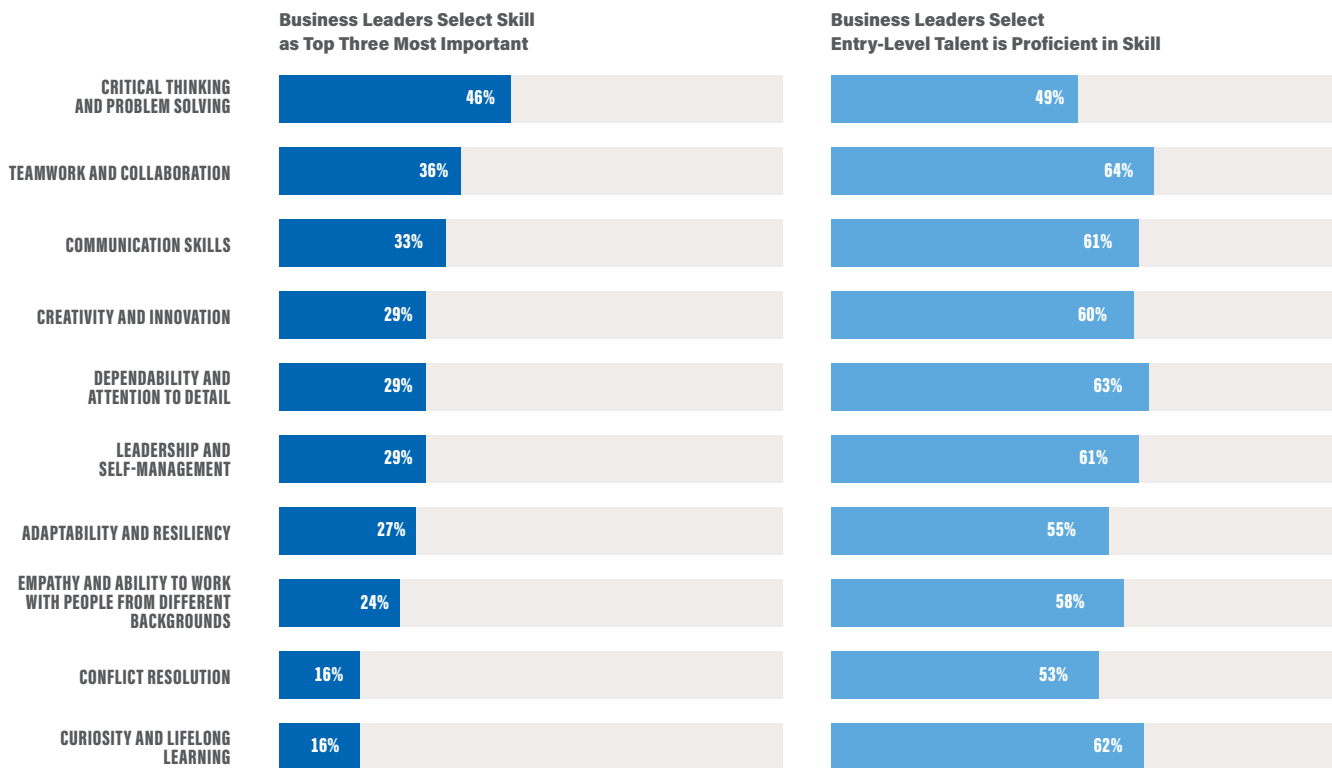**Source:** BHEF Analysis of Lightcast Job Postings Data, 2024

Durable Skills

BHEF's network of regional and national employers consistently emphasize the importance of durable skills like communication, accountability, and critical thinking in entry-level talent. In this study, business leaders cited the top three most important durable skills for entry-level talent as: 1) critical thinking and problem solving, 2) teamwork and collaboration, and 3) communication skills. However, when asked about specific durable skills, as many as half of employers reported that new graduates are not entering the workforce with proficiency in several key areas, particularly thinking critically and solving problems—and that those gaps are becoming more pronounced than in the past. Moreover, many employers highlight durable skills as a key factor in their hiring decisions, noting that while they can teach technical skills on the job, it is more challenging to foster durable skills in new hires. These skills impact every industry and represent opportunities for business and higher education to collaborate on experiential opportunities where learners can acquire such skills in a contextual manner.

> *Nearly two-third (62%) of business leaders report that it is a challenge to find entry-level talent with durable skills and that new graduates need more exposure in key areas like critical thinking and problem solving.*

FIG. 3 **Most Important Durable Skills and Proficiency of Entry-Level Talent**

Business Leaders Select Skill as Top Three Most Important / **Business Leaders Select Entry-Level Talent is Proficient in Skill**

Skill	Top Three Most Important	Proficient in Skill
CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING	46%	49%
TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION	36%	64%
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	33%	61%
CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION	29%	60%
DEPENDABILITY AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL	29%	63%
LEADERSHIP AND SELF-MANAGEMENT	29%	61%
ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCY	27%	55%
EMPATHY AND ABILITY TO WORK WITH PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS	24%	58%
CONFLICT RESOLUTION	16%	53%
CURIOSITY AND LIFELONG LEARNING	16%	62%

Note: N=380 business leader responses. Fig. 3 shows the percent of business leader respondents who select skill and the percent of business leader respondents indicating entry-level talent is proficient "most of the time." Survey Question: "For the following durable skills, indicate which skills are the top three most important across entry-level talent at your organization in the next 12 month (Select top three)."; "Does your entry-level talent have the right level of proficiency in these skills?"
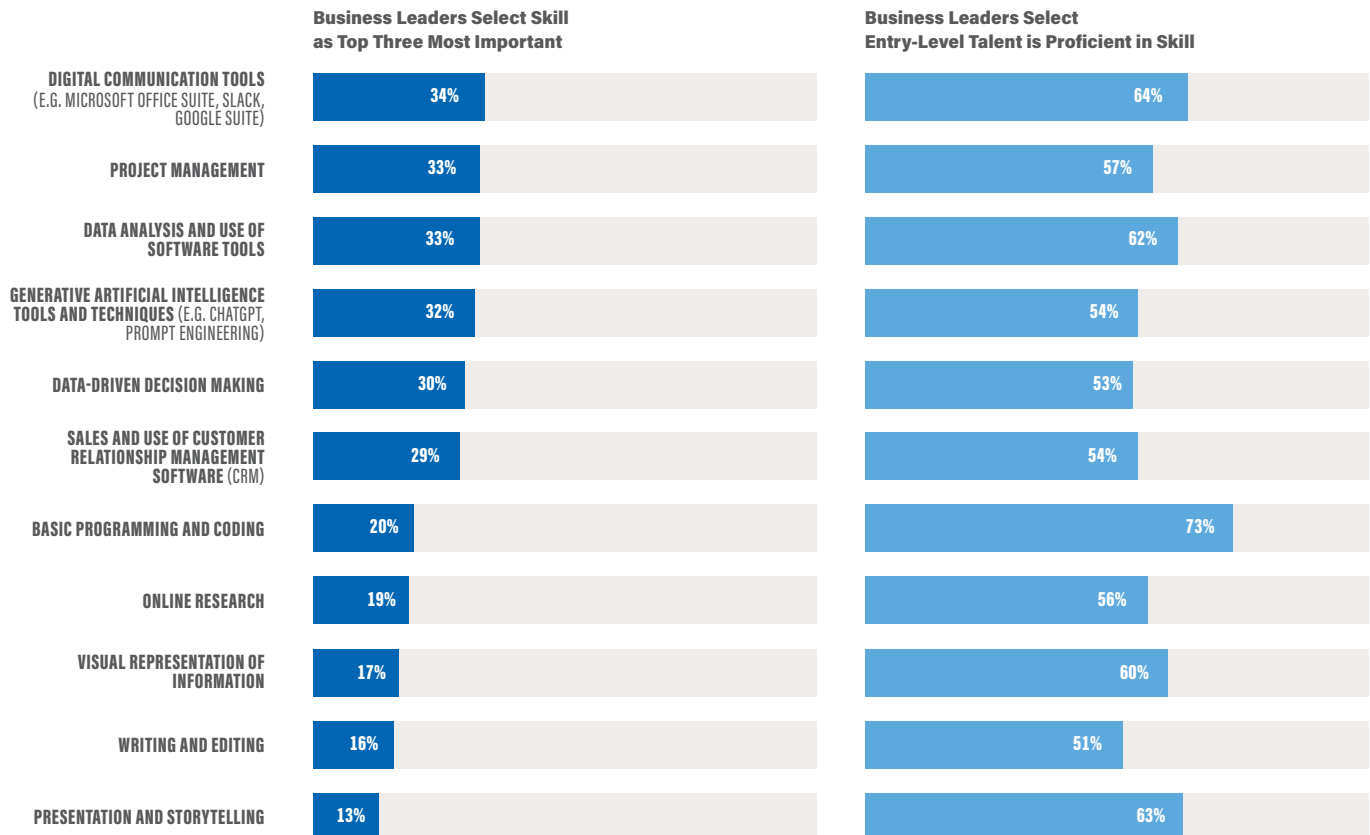**Source**: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Business Skills

Essential skills for the workplace, needed across all roles, have grown to include digital literacy, the ability to communicate online, and data foundations. The expansion of remote and hybrid work has accelerated the importance of those skills. An executive from a major accounting firm shared that entry-level talent require coaching on how to write an email and struggle to respond to digital communication (Slack/Teams) within a reasonable amount of time. Colleges and universities have an opportunity to embed such core digital communication skills into their curricula, including through experiential learning and feedback informed and supported by employers.

Employers will continue to need to hire people with new and emerging skills like those involving generative AI. While it is only beginning to appear and ramp up as a requirement in job postings, businesses recognize generative AI's importance and are seeking such skills in new hires. In this study, more than one-third of business respondents said it was among the three most important skills for entry-level talent to display over the next 24 months. That suggests that today's job postings lag future demand for emerging and high-growth capabilities, so direct conversations with employers are also an important means of gathering insights.

Two-thirds (65%) of business leaders report that it is a challenge to find entry-level talent with adequate business skills.

FIG. 4 **Most Important Business Skills** and Proficiency of Entry-Level Talent

	Business Leaders Select Skill as Top Three Most Important	Business Leaders Select Entry-Level Talent is Proficient in Skill
DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS (E.G. MICROSOFT OFFICE SUITE, SLACK, GOOGLE SUITE)	34%	64%
PROJECT MANAGEMENT	33%	57%
DATA ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOFTWARE TOOLS	33%	62%
GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES (E.G. CHATGPT, PROMPT ENGINEERING)	32%	54%
DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING	30%	53%
SALES AND USE OF CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE (CRM)	29%	54%
BASIC PROGRAMMING AND CODING	20%	73%
ONLINE RESEARCH	19%	56%
VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF INFORMATION	17%	60%
WRITING AND EDITING	16%	51%
PRESENTATION AND STORYTELLING	13%	63%

Note: N=380 business leader responses. Fig. 4 shows the percent of business leader respondents who select skill and the percent of business leader respondents indicating entry-level talent is proficient "most of the time." Survey Question: "For the following business skills, indicate which skills are the top three most important across entry-level talent at your organization in the next 12 month (Select top three)."; "Does your entry-level talent have the right level of proficiency in these skills?" **Source**: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Technical Skills and Occupations

Businesses across sectors report that their most pressing talent challenge is a lack of applicants with the right technical skills. They struggle to recruit qualified talent for in-demand occupations such as business, finance, IT, and support roles. Two of the top five selected occupations require specialized technology skills, with IT/computer science leading the way. Four of the top five emerging jobs also demand such specialized technology skills. However, like Generative AI, many of these emerging occupations and skillsets have yet to fully materialize and mature in the labor market. They are changing and developing more rapidly than ever, and they require close and ongoing collaboration between business and education to ensure that the current educational pathways are adequately responsive and evolving.

Two-thirds (66%) of business leaders report that it is a challenge to find entry-level talent with the technical skills needed for new in-demand occupations.

FIG. 5A **Occupations In-Demand by Difficult to find Qualified Talent for Today**

	Occupation	Business Leaders Select
1	Business Management and Operations	40%
2	IT and Computer Science	32%
3	Customer and Client Support	25%
4	Clerical and Administrative	22%
5	Finance / HR / Construction / Engineering (tied)	14%

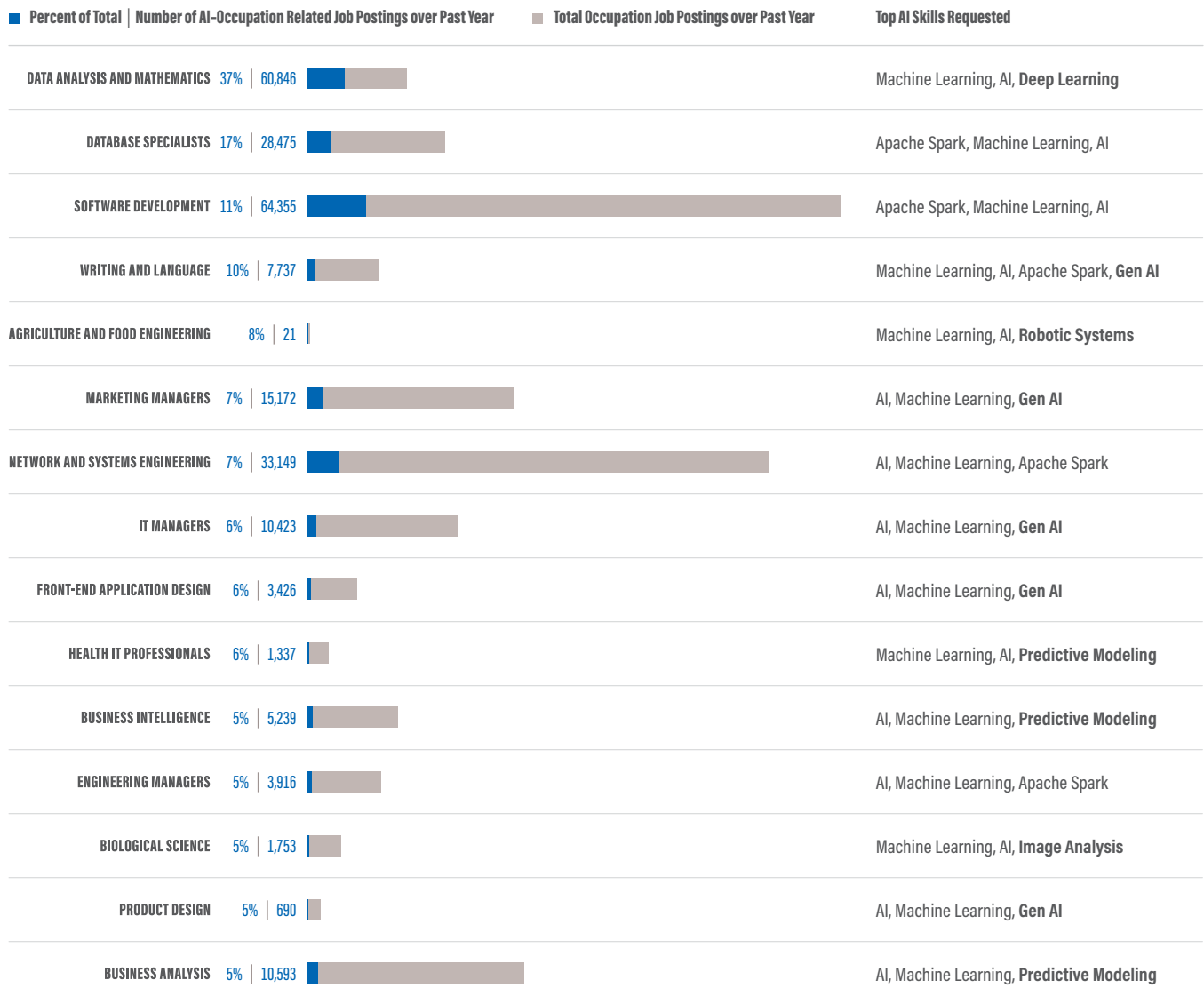FIG. 5B **Emerging Occupations with Expected Job Openings in the Next 24 Months**

	Occupation	Business Leaders Select
1	Artificial Intelligence	45%
2	Cybersecurity and Data Technologies	38%
3	Advanced Computing	32%
4	Operations	32%
5	Human-Machine Interfaces	25%

Note: N=380 business leader responses. 5A and 5B show the percent of business leader respondents who selected occupation. 5A Survey Question: "Which occupations are in-demand but are difficult to find qualified talent for right now? (Select all that apply)." 5B Survey Question: "For which of the following emerging occupations do you expect to have job openings at any level in the next 24 months? (Select all that apply).
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Proliferation of AI in the Workplace

FIG. 6 **Top Occupations that Requested AI Skills Over Past Year as a Percentage of Total Occupation Job Postings**

■ Percent of Total │ Number of AI-Occupation Related Job Postings over Past Year	■ Total Occupation Job Postings over Past Year	Top AI Skills Requested
DATA ANALYSIS AND MATHEMATICS	37% │ 60,846		Machine Learning, AI, **Deep Learning**
DATABASE SPECIALISTS	17% │ 28,475		Apache Spark, Machine Learning, AI
SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT	11% │ 64,355		Apache Spark, Machine Learning, AI
WRITING AND LANGUAGE	10% │ 7,737		Machine Learning, AI, Apache Spark, **Gen AI**
AGRICULTURE AND FOOD ENGINEERING	8% │ 21		Machine Learning, AI, **Robotic Systems**
MARKETING MANAGERS	7% │ 15,172		AI, Machine Learning, **Gen AI**
NETWORK AND SYSTEMS ENGINEERING	7% │ 33,149		AI, Machine Learning, Apache Spark
IT MANAGERS	6% │ 10,423		AI, Machine Learning, **Gen AI**
FRONT-END APPLICATION DESIGN	6% │ 3,426		AI, Machine Learning, **Gen AI**
HEALTH IT PROFESSIONALS	6% │ 1,337		Machine Learning, AI, **Predictive Modeling**
BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE	5% │ 5,239		AI, Machine Learning, **Predictive Modeling**
ENGINEERING MANAGERS	5% │ 3,916		AI, Machine Learning, Apache Spark
BIOLOGICAL SCIENCE	5% │ 1,753		Machine Learning, AI, **Image Analysis**
PRODUCT DESIGN	5% │ 690		AI, Machine Learning, **Gen AI**
BUSINESS ANALYSIS	5% │ 10,593		AI, Machine Learning, **Predictive Modeling**

Source: BHEF Analysis of Lightcast Job Postings Data, 2024

AI is the leading area of expected job growth over the next two years. As AI proliferates across industries, companies, and job positions, collaboration between business and higher education is crucial for ensuring that new graduates, as well as incumbent workers, are equipped to effectively and responsibly use such tools.

AI is already reshaping numerous occupations and industries, including non-tech roles that may be surprising like Writing and Language and Marketing. Although the data from job postings does not fully display the dispersion of this emerging technology, its impact is already reflected in technology and data-related roles. And over the past year alone, more than 35% of the job postings involving data analysis and mathematics across the country have requested AI skills. A Brookings Institution report published this year estimates that more than 30% of all workers, especially women and people in clerical roles, could see at least 50% of their occupation's tasks disrupted by generative AI, with middle- to higher-paid jobs experiencing the greatest impact.

U.S. adoption of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has been faster than adoption of both the personal computer and the internet. AI has the potential to increase income, enhance productivity, and enable individuals to focus on higher-level human work. Yet AI also has the potential to devalue certain skills, create insecurity, and increase inequity if its potential benefits are not made available to everyone.

Inequities in adoption and use of Gen AI have already emerged: women, people with less formal education, older Americans, and those with non-STEM backgrounds are using Gen AI at lower rates, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. Handshake's 2024 graduate survey shows a similar story for recent graduates: students at less-selective institutions and females are less familiar with GenAI tools. Unless such inequities are addressed, AI's impact on the workforce will be profound and uneven. It is a critical and urgent inflection point in our economy. Ensuring broad AI access and training for all is a shared responsibility between business and higher education.

Business and higher education leaders, however, have divergent views on the readiness of their organizations to respond and prepare for the AI-enabled future. The higher education leaders surveyed are less confident in their own ability to use AI in their day-to-day roles, pointing to the need for concerted professional development and support for frontline administrators who use AI in their work. With AI as the top area of anticipated job growth among emerging occupations

over the next two years, businesses and higher education must align and develop a shared language to clearly define and address evolving skill needs. While business leaders are confident that new graduates are equipped with the AI skills needed to enter today's workforce, partnerships will increase the confidence of higher education leaders. Exemplary partnerships between higher education institutions and businesses are already paving the way by championing AI literacy and accessibility and inclusively preparing the workforce for an AI-driven future:

The **National Applied Artificial Intelligence Consortium** (NAAIC), for example, is a collaboration between Miami Dade College, Houston Community College, and the Maricopa Community College District. NAAIC aims to provide "leadership, training, and guidance for community colleges and companies in the development and growth of AI professionals nationally."

The goal is to ensure a diverse and well-trained workforce to meet the AI needs of the future by disseminating knowledge about those needs; helping community colleges develop and implement ethical AI courses, certificates, and degrees; and supporting the professional development of faculty members in teaching AI.

The consortium is supported by several key business partners including Intel, AWS, Microsoft, Dell, Google, and SeedAI. (Miami Dade College, 2024).

Charter Oak State College, Connecticut's public online college, is a leader in providing inclusive training on AI. Their AI Online Academy offers free basic training to all residents in Connecticut with a goal for "every resident, employee, and employer in Connecticut to have access to AI skills training." At the completion of the course, participants receive a Google AI Essentials badge.
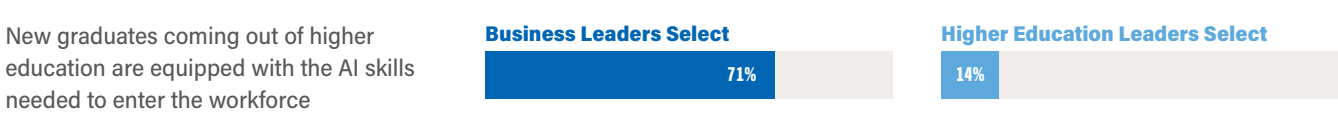
- AI Online Academy Modules include:
  - Discovering AI: Fundamentals and Applications
  - Working Smarter with AI: Maximizing Productivity
  - Crafting Effective Prompts: Strategies and Best Practices
  - Human-centered AI: Prioritizing Ethics and Well-Being
  - Future Proofing with AI: Continuously Improving and Innovating (Charter Oak State College, 2024)

FIG. 7 **Perception of AI Skills** by Segment

I feel equipped to use and implement AI in my role and daily work

Business Leaders Select
82%

Higher Education Leaders Select
22%

Note: N=373 business leader responses and N=207 higher education leader responses. Fig. 7 shows the percent of respondents who selected they "Agree" or "Agree Strongly" with statement. Survey Question: "Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements: I feel equipped to use and implement AI in my role and daily work."
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

FIG. 8 **Perception of AI Skills** by Segment

New graduates coming out of higher education are equipped with the AI skills needed to enter the workforce

Business Leaders Select
71%

Higher Education Leaders Select
14%

Note: N=373 business leader responses and N=206 higher education leader responses. Fig. 8 shows the percent of respondents who selected they "Agree" or "Agree Strongly" with statement. Survey Question: "Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements: New graduates coming out of higher education are equipped with the AI skills needed to enter the workforce."
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Business-Higher Education Partnerships that Bolster the Skills of the Future

87%

of **higher education leaders** agree that partnerships with business are a priority

89%

of **business leaders** agree that partnerships with higher education are a priority

22%

of **higher education leaders** say they are fully executing a partnership strategy

Historically, American businesses and higher education institutions operated in different sections along a linear talent pipeline, each adhering to a traditionally defined role. Higher education institutions designed curricula and prepared students at the start of a career, while employers provided jobs. However, that linear approach cannot meet the demands of today's dynamic workforce. As rapid advancements reshape industries, students and workers must become lifelong learners, necessitating a shift from a one-way talent pipeline to a continuous, collaborative cycle. To achieve that, businesses and educational institutions must transcend conventional boundaries, broadening their roles in talent development. Building a shared responsibility and commitment to partnership is essential to reimagine the talent pipeline as an adaptive, mutually beneficial ecosystem that equips both workers and industries for sustained success.

Advancing Skills-based Practices Through Collaboration

As students and workers evaluate the return on investment of attending college to gain in-demand skills and credentials and ultimately enter the workforce, higher education institutions have responded by offering a broader array of shorter, industry-aligned offerings—such as microcredentials, certificates, and industry-recognized credentials. Simultaneously, employers in the public and private sectors are taking a harder look at the value of degrees as a hiring requirement. The move toward skills-based practices requires a new way of approaching the worlds of learning and work. It involves, among other things, translating learning outcomes into metrics like KSAs (which measure knowledge, skills, and abilities) that are interpretable by employers; conducting competency assessments of existing workforces to understand priority skills and skills gaps; describing career paths; and improving performance management. The complexity of those undertakings contributes to the slow uptake of skills-based practices. The Burning Glass Institute found that one of 700 hires in the previous year were a result of skills-based hiring and that this work requires close partnerships between business and higher education institutions to be successful.

BHEF's survey of business leaders on their hiring practices paints a mixed picture and demonstrates their continued interest in a combination of different hiring paths and approaches. Half of the business leaders said they agree that bachelor's degrees will increase in importance in hiring over the next three years, while 40% said graduate degrees and industry certifications will. At the same time, according to the survey, 40% also reported removing bachelor's degrees from some or all of job postings within the last three years. (Only 8% reported removing the bachelor's degree as a requirement from all job postings.) As a result of such changes, one in three business leaders reported hiring fewer workers without degrees, 16% reported no change in who has been hired, and 45% reported hiring more workers without degrees.
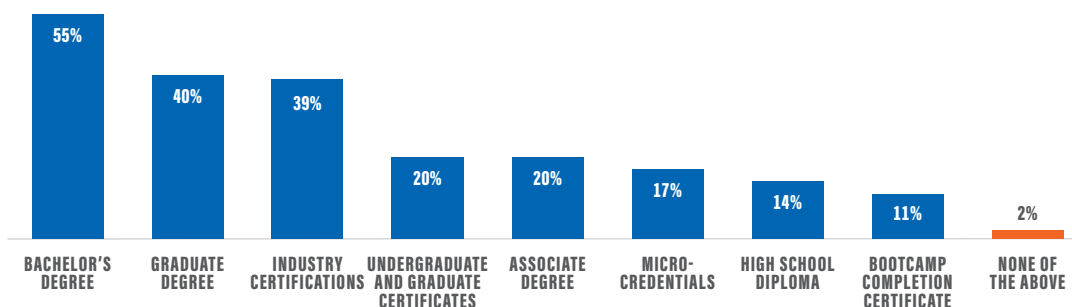
In this hiring context, where employers value a range of credentials, a desire to better assess skills is a common theme that cuts across all industries and roles. As many as 83% of the business leaders we surveyed said that better assessing and signaling workers' skills proficiency and gaps is a priority for their companies. A similar percent of business leaders report that their organizational practices and technology enable them to determine workers' skills proficiencies and gaps. Even so, about half of business leaders still say they would like to better understand those skills and identify gaps across their workforces, as well as to better connect learning to skills and provide career path options to workers.

Higher education is in a more transitional period than the business community. Sixty-six percent of higher education institution leaders agree or strongly agree that better assessing and signaling students' skills proficiency and gaps are a priority for their institution. But only 42% report that existing institutional practice and technology enables them to obtain this information. That response aligns with a study the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning released earlier this year that found 44% of higher education administrators, faculty, and staff from 144 colleges and universities said their institution had developed skills- or competency-based frameworks for at least some of their programs.

Skills-based practices offer substantial opportunities for learners and workers to thrive in the labor market by aligning their capabilities with industry needs. For such initiatives to succeed, however, business and higher education institutions must work together to communicate skills proficiencies and gaps clearly, enable individuals to demonstrate their competencies effectively, and establish seamless pathways from learning to employment that marry skills, credentials, and degrees.

FIG. 9 **Which of the Following Credentials, If Any, Do You Expect to Increase in Importance in Hiring Over the Next Three Years?**

Business Leaders Select

BACHELOR'S DEGREE	GRADUATE DEGREE	INDUSTRY CERTIFICATIONS	UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE CERTIFICATES	ASSOCIATE DEGREE	MICRO-CREDENTIALS	HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA	BOOTCAMP COMPLETION CERTIFICATE	NONE OF THE ABOVE
55%	40%	39%	20%	20%	17%	14%	11%	2%

Note: N=380 business leader responses. Fig. 9 shows the percent of respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "Which of the following credentials, if any, do you expect to increase in importance in hiring over the next three years? (Select up to three.)" **Source**: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Business leaders and higher education leaders agree that establishing partnerships with each other is a top priority for their organizations. In fact, 89% of business leaders agree or strongly agree that they have a responsibility to invest in higher education and talent development. Among organizations with existing partnerships, 87% of the businesses surveyed view them as successful overall, a notably higher level of satisfaction with partnership performance than that of higher education respondents, of whom 60% reported viewing them as successful. This positive view generally is due to the impact seen on partnerships' ability to meet specific goals, with certain goals more likely to be achieved than others.

Business leaders have diverse priorities for partnerships with higher education, spanning from developing and teaching

FIG. 10 **Business Leaders** Select Top Priorities for Higher Education Partnerships

Priority	%
PROVIDING UPSKILLING/RESKILLING TRAINING TO EXISTING WORKFORCE	45%
STRENGTHEN RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PIPELINES	35%
INCREASE ACCESS TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING	31%
EXPAND EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN DEVELOPING AND TEACHING CURRICULA ALIGNED TO INDUSTRY NEEDS	29%
ENSURE STUDENTS HAVE THE RIGHT SKILLS AND CREDENTIALS TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE	27%

FIG. 11 **Higher Education Leaders** Select Top Priorities for Business Partnerships

Priority	%
ENSURE STUDENTS HAVE THE RIGHT SKILLS AND CREDENTIALS TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE	56%
INCREASE ACCESS TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING	53%
PROVIDE BETTER INFORMATION ON CAREER PATHWAYS TO STUDENTS AND WORKERS	31%
STRENGTHEN RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PIPELINES	30%
EXPAND EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN DEVELOPING AND TEACHING CURRICULA ALIGNED TO INDUSTRY NEEDS	25%

Note: N=380 business leader responses and N=223 higher education leader responses. Fig. 10 and 11 show the percent of respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "Over the next year, which of the following are your organization's top priorities for business-higher education partnerships related to student and career readiness and talent development? (Select top three)." **Source**: SSPRS 2024 responses.
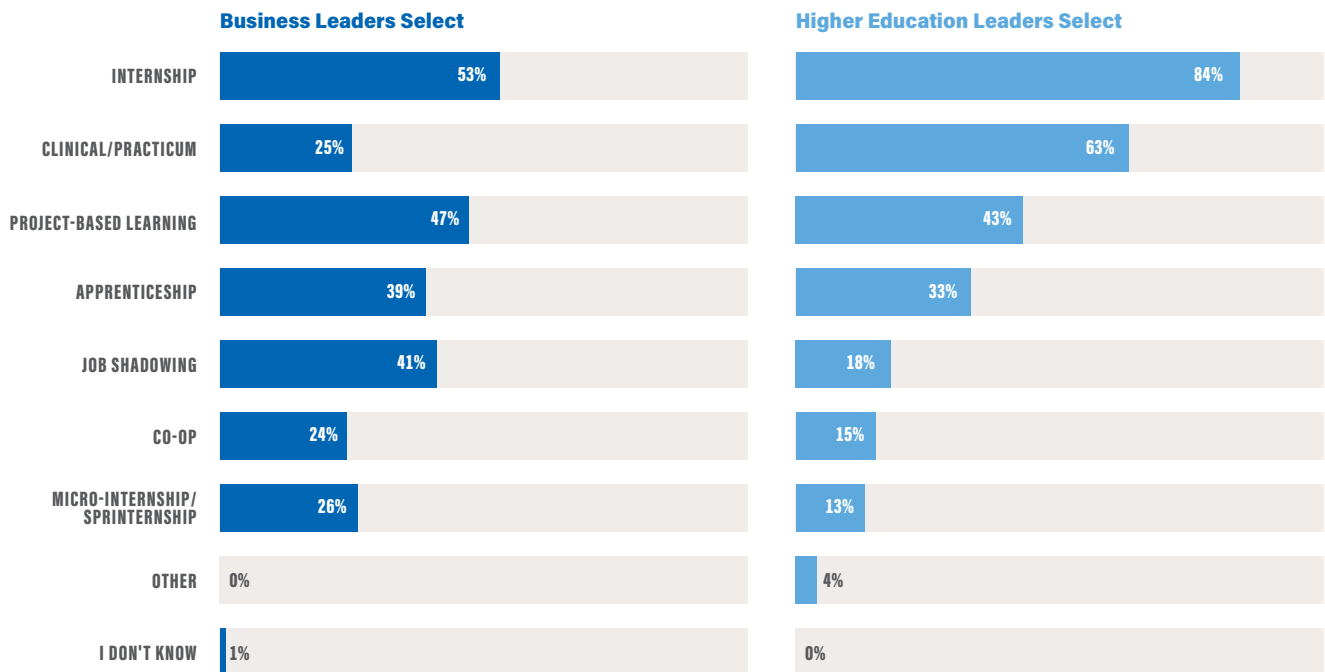
curricula aligned to industry needs to providing students and workers better information on career pathways to ensuring that students have the right skills and credentials to enter the workforce. Overall, the top priority for business leaders in the next year is working with higher education to provide upskilling and reskilling training to their existing workforce.

Beyond that top priority, variations emerge by industry, highlighting the need for higher education institutions to tailor partnerships according to each company's specific aims. Leaders in the trades, like construction and manufacturing, are more likely to prioritize improving the affordability of degrees and credentials. Healthcare, finance and insurance, and information industry leaders are more likely to prioritize increasing student access to coaching and mentoring in order to support professional success. And leaders in the retail industry are more likely to prioritize diversifying their recruitment pipelines. By aligning program offerings, affordability strategies, and career support with the distinct goals of different industries, higher education leaders can create more targeted, impactful partnerships that better serve both student and workforce needs.

Higher education leaders are more focused when it comes to their top priorities for partnering with business on career readiness and talent development. As illustrated in figure 11, more than half want to collaborate with businesses to ensure that students have the right skills and credentials to enter the workforce, as well as to increase access to experiential learning.

However, leaders from two-year and four-year institutions do have some differing priorities. While about a third of four-year institution leaders rate increasing student access to coaching and mentoring to support professional success among their top three priorities for partnerships, only 8% of those at two-year institutions do. For their part, two-year institution leaders are twice as likely (41%) than their peers at four-year institutions (19%) to include expanding employer engagement in developing and teaching curricula aligned to industry needs in their top three priorities for partnerships. Leaders of two-year institutions are also more than twice as likely to prioritize providing upskilling and/or reskilling training to people in the current workforce (38% of two-year institution leaders compared to 16% of four-year institutions leaders).

Leaders at two-year institutions are ahead of their four-year counterparts in actively implementing partnership strategies and finding significant common ground in their partnership priorities with businesses. This focus appears to be paying off, as 70% of two-year institution leaders describe their partnerships as high performing, whereas only 54% of four-year institution leaders say the same.

Expanding Work-Based Learning Partnerships to Increase Career-Readiness
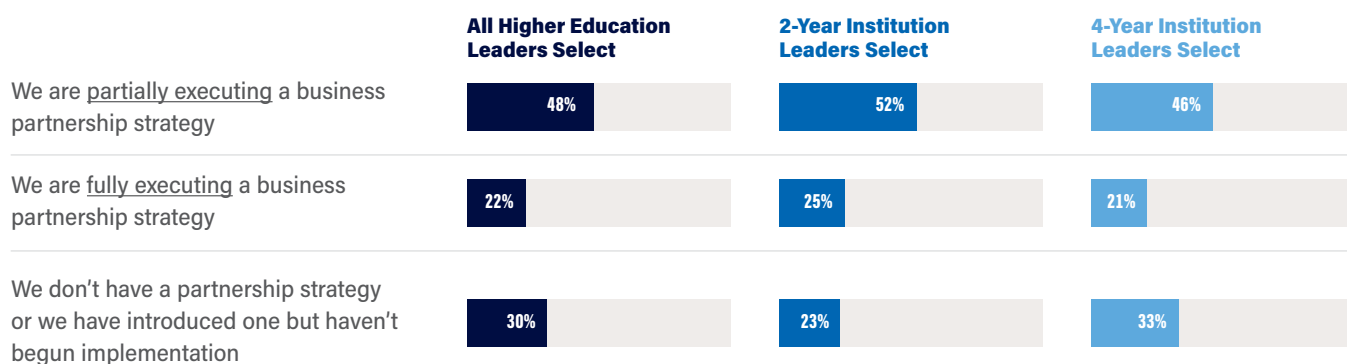
Increasing access to experiential learning emerged as a top priority for one in three business leaders seeking to strengthen their partnerships with higher education over the next year. When asked about the types of work-based learning that are most effective for enhancing students' career readiness, 53% of business leaders and an overwhelming 84% of higher education leaders identified internships as the most valuable format. Notably, business leaders were twice as likely as their higher education counterparts to view job shadowing and microinternships as valuable.

This difference underscores an opportunity for higher education institutions to expand partnerships around low-intensity work-based learning models, such as those requiring 40 hours or less. Such models could be more accessible for employers and students, give students greater exposure to more diverse careers, and increase the number of employers engaged in partnerships. To learn more about employers' perspectives on internships and strategies to design and increase such opportunities, visit bhef.com/internships.

FIG. 12 **Most Valuable Work-based Learning Experiences for Increasing Students' Career Readiness**

Business Leaders Select

INTERNSHIP	53%
CLINICAL/PRACTICUM	25%
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING	47%
APPRENTICESHIP	39%
JOB SHADOWING	41%
CO-OP	24%
MICRO-INTERNSHIP/SPRINTERNSHIP	26%
OTHER	0%
I DON'T KNOW	1%

Higher Education Leaders Select

INTERNSHIP	84%
CLINICAL/PRACTICUM	63%
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING	43%
APPRENTICESHIP	33%
JOB SHADOWING	18%
CO-OP	15%
MICRO-INTERNSHIP/SPRINTERNSHIP	13%
OTHER	4%
I DON'T KNOW	0%

Note: N=380 business leader responses and N=226 higher education leader responses. Fig. 12 shows the percent of respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "What type of experiential or work-based learning are most valuable for increasing students' career readiness? (Select top three)."
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

FIG. 13 **Status of Higher Education's Business Partnerships** by Institution Type

	All Higher Education Leaders Select	2-Year Institution Leaders Select	4-Year Institution Leaders Select
We are <u>partially executing</u> a business partnership strategy	48%	52%	46%
We are <u>fully executing</u> a business partnership strategy	22%	25%	21%
We don't have a partnership strategy or we have introduced one but haven't begun implementation	30%	23%	33%

Note: N=226 higher education leader responses. Fig. 13 shows the percent of respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "What is the status of your institution's business partnerships?"
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Meanwhile, just 22% of higher education leaders report that their strategies are fully realized, while nearly an equal share has yet to begin pursuing them. The majority, 60%, find themselves somewhere in between, with partnership plans introduced or partially underway. Four-year institutions have a valuable opportunity to learn from the partnership approaches of two-year colleges, which have been more proactive in implementing partnership strategies focused on employment because of their historical mission and focus.

So how do we move from partnership aspiration to reality? Partners need to overcome barriers and coalesce around the shared goals and tactics that make partnerships successful. Yet higher education institutions and businesses have different incentives, structures, and contexts to navigate.

Higher education leaders report two primary barriers in working with their business partners. The first is primarily an internal challenge: a lack of personnel and/or financial resources for partnerships (62%). As a result, we see more institutions creating centralized roles to manage employer partnerships. The second top challenge, identified by 46% of higher education leaders, relates to collecting metrics to measure partnerships' progress and successes.

Business leaders have more diverse perspectives on the barriers that impede partnership. The top ones they say they experience when working with higher education institutions include a lack of:
- Tools and template agreements for developing and implementing partnerships;
- Technology to support and manage partnerships;
- Clear understanding of each partners' roles and responsibilities; and
- Metrics to measure their partnerships' progress and successes.

The elements that drive the success of partnerships are both strategic and tactical. Half of higher education institution leaders selected internal factors—such as executive level buy-in and support as well as adequate staffing and financial resources—as the top elements that make partnerships successful within their organizations. Higher education leaders also point to the need to have clear alignment on partnership goals and to collaborate on metrics to measure each partnership's progress and success. Business leaders agree with higher education leaders that executive level buy-in, clear alignment of partnership goals, and adequate staffing and financial resources make partnerships successful at their organizations. One in three business leaders also believe that access to and use of technology to manage partnerships leads to success, as well as a commitment to hire and/or train a certain number of individuals.

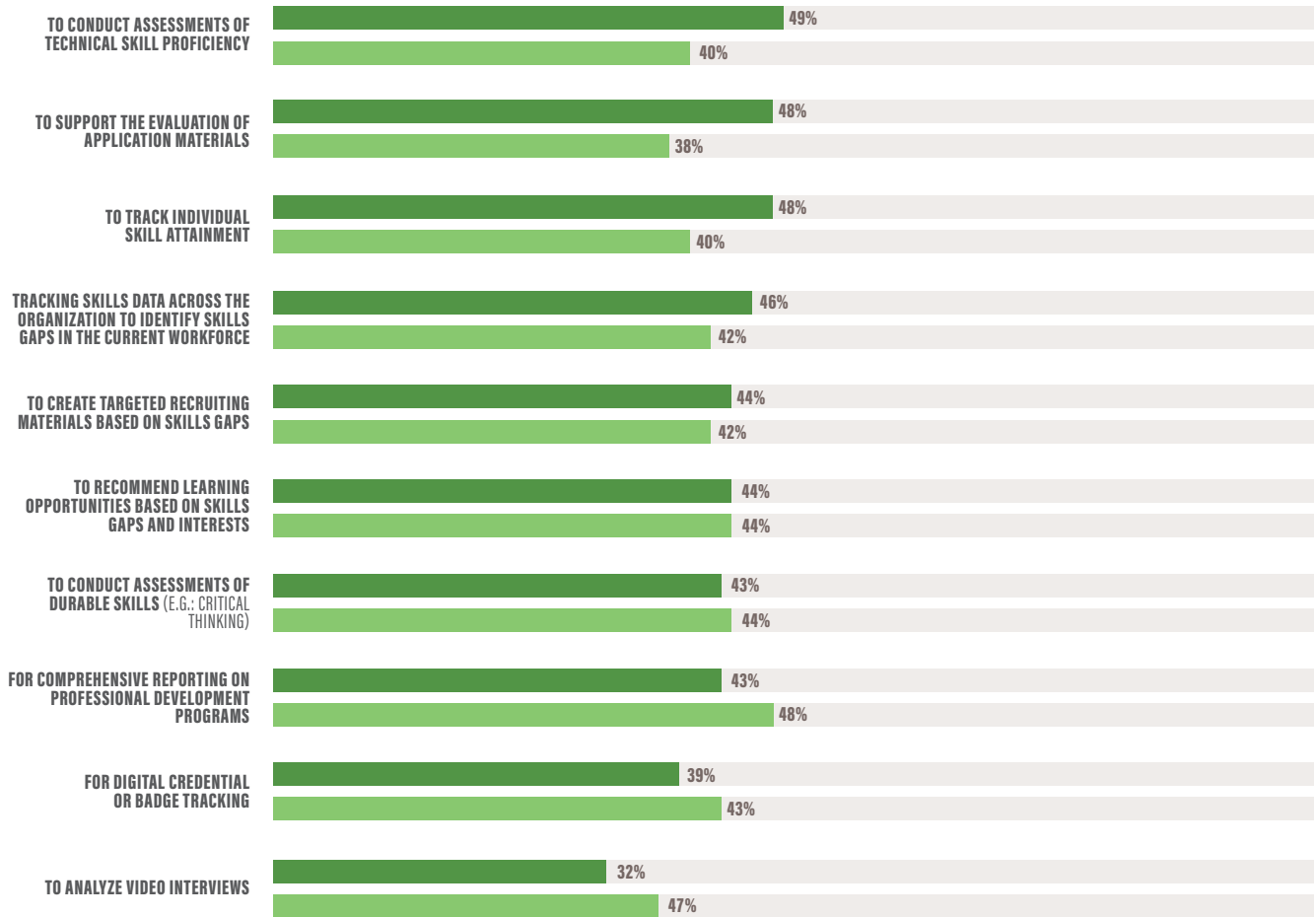FIG. 14 **Elements that Make Business-Higher Education Partnerships Successful**

	Business Leaders Select	**Higher Education Leaders Select**
CLEAR ALIGNMENT OF PARTNERSHIP GOALS	33%	57%
EXECUTIVE-LEVEL BUY-IN AND SUPPORT	31%	52%
ADEQUATE STAFFING AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES	29%	45%
A SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT AT THE RESPECTIVE PARTNER ORGANIZATION	23%	37%
A COMMITMENT TO HIRE/TRAIN A CERTAIN NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS	31%	18%
ACCESS TO AND USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO MANAGE PARTNERSHIPS	33%	14%

Note: N=379 business leader responses and N=214 higher education leader responses. Fig. 14 shows the percent of respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "What elements make business/higher education partnerships most successful at your organization? (Select top three)."
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Leveraging Technology to Improve Skills Acquisition, Assessment, and Validation

FIG. 15 **Business Leaders** Select Interest in Using Technology for Skills Acquisition, Assessment and Validation

■ Currently Using   ■ Interested in Using

	Currently Using	Interested in Using
TO CONDUCT ASSESSMENTS OF TECHNICAL SKILL PROFICIENCY	49%	40%
TO SUPPORT THE EVALUATION OF APPLICATION MATERIALS	48%	38%
TO TRACK INDIVIDUAL SKILL ATTAINMENT	48%	40%
TRACKING SKILLS DATA ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION TO IDENTIFY SKILLS GAPS IN THE CURRENT WORKFORCE	46%	42%
TO CREATE TARGETED RECRUITING MATERIALS BASED ON SKILLS GAPS	44%	42%
TO RECOMMEND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES BASED ON SKILLS GAPS AND INTERESTS	44%	44%
TO CONDUCT ASSESSMENTS OF DURABLE SKILLS (E.G.: CRITICAL THINKING)	43%	44%
FOR COMPREHENSIVE REPORTING ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS	43%	48%
FOR DIGITAL CREDENTIAL OR BADGE TRACKING	39%	43%
TO ANALYZE VIDEO INTERVIEWS	32%	47%

Note: N=320 or 380 business leader responses, depending on item. Fig. 15 shows the percent of business leader respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "Please indicate your interest in using technology to support the following activities related to skill acquisition, assessment, and validation."
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

Emerging technologies are not only changing how jobs are done. They are also impacting how businesses manage talent acquisition and development, as well as how higher education institutions share career information with learners and align with industry. Business leaders express higher rates of technology use for applications that range from supporting partnerships to skills assessments to offering professional development opportunities. However, there is great interest from higher education leaders in leveraging technology in new areas, including recruitment strategies, alumni engagement, and program development.

Businesses and EdTech partners can play a vital role in helping higher education institutions adopt new forms of technology to strengthen partnerships and improve skill alignment. By sharing expertise and best practices, business leaders can support higher education in integrating technology more effectively, such as through systems and tools that can identify and recommend learning opportunities based on skill gaps or create targeted recruiting materials.

FIG. 16 **Higher Education Leaders** Select Interest in Using Technology for Skills Acquisition, Assessment and Validation

■ Currently Using   ■ Interested in Using

	Currently Using	Interested in Using
OFFER CAREER INFORMATION (E.G., SALARY, CAREER PATHS, ETC.)	53%	36%
RETAIN STUDENTS BY CONNECTING LEARNING TO SKILLS AND CAREERS	40%	50%
TO RECOMMEND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES BASED ON SKILLS GAPS AND INTERESTS	24%	65%
BUILD CONTINUING ED CONTENT AND PROGRAMS BASED ON IN-DEMAND SKILLS	23%	53%
RECRUIT ALUMNI TO CONTINUING ED COURSES BASED ON SKILL PROFILE	22%	56%
EXTRACT SKILLS FROM COURSES TO CREATE A LEARNER'S SKILL PROFILE	18%	63%
TO CREATE TARGETED RECRUITING MATERIALS BASED ON SKILLS GAPS	17%	53%

Note: N=202 higher education leader responses. Fig. 16 shows the percent of higher education leader respondents who selected each option. Survey Question: "Please indicate your interest in using technology to support the following activities related to skill acquisition, assessment, and validation."
Source: SSPRS 2024 responses.

*There is great interest from higher education leaders in **leveraging technology in new areas**, including recruitment strategies, alumni engagement, and program development.*

Building More Effective Partnerships

Bridging the gap between the ambitious goals of partnership initiatives and their current level of implementation requires addressing the existing barriers that both business and higher education leaders have described. The following targeted recommendations focus on overcoming persistent challenges surfaced by BHEF's State of Skills and Partnerships Research Study (SSPRS) and long-term work in the field fostering deeper collaboration and maximizing the potential of partnerships. They outline actionable strategies to advance partnerships into high-performing, mutually beneficial alliances that are responsive to both workforce and educational demands.

Cultivating Alignment and Finding the Right Partners

Alignment is consistently identified as the most crucial factor in successful partnerships, valued by both business and higher education institutions as the foundation for creating and sustaining impactful collaborations. BHEF's work to facilitate strong partnerships over the decades indicates that such alignment is essential for building effective, strategic partnerships. To foster stronger alignment and enhance partnership efficacy, consider the following strategies:

- **Pursue transparency on goals and build trusting relationships.** Successful partnerships are built on a clear and shared understanding of goals—whether they are fully aligned or distinct yet complementary. For example, a business may seek to upskill its workforce through higher education programs, while simultaneously supporting career exploration and mentorship for students outside its organization. Clear articulation of goals, often championed by executive leadership, can generate the buy-in and commitment necessary to drive success. Equally important is mutual clarity on each partner's expectations and desired return on investment, coupled with a shared commitment to achieving it. Strong alliances thrive when partners establish a relationship of trust and openness are dedicated to each other's success, and supported by a sustainable business model.

- **Leverage third-party assistance.** Workforce development organizations and intermediary groups play a pivotal role in fostering successful partnerships. These entities can effectively match partners, facilitate goal alignment, and ensure accountability. Data from this study reveal that high-performing partnerships are 10 to 15 percentage points more likely to engage in national, state, or regional workforce-development initiatives. Additionally, businesses are 12 percentage points more likely to report a partnership is successful when intermediary organizations are involved.

Addressing Resource Gaps

Both business and higher education leaders report that limited personnel and financial resources hinder partnership effectiveness, with higher education institutions particularly impacted. This resource gap, cited by nearly two-thirds (62%) of higher education respondents as a primary challenge, often becomes a fundamental obstacle to launching and sustaining partnerships. To mitigate resource limitations, partnerships may benefit from the following approach:

- **Streamline and invest in partnership functions.** Some large employers designate a specific university partnerships role that is tasked with cultivating and managing

collaborations across talent development, research, and corporate social responsibility. But they are in the minority: 38% of business leaders describe their approach to higher education partnerships as centralized. An even smaller share of higher education leaders (16%) describes their approach to business partnerships as centralized. However, higher education institutions are slowly establishing centralized employer partnership roles and functions that support this critical activity. The creation of an external facing partnership function backed by clear points of contact and resources to support it can enable high-performing partnerships to thrive.

Developing a Skills Infrastructure

As skills-based practices grow, both business and higher education leaders are emphasizing the need for improved skills assessment and signaling to connect education with career path development. However, a robust skills infrastructure remains underdeveloped, limiting progress in this area. (See "Leveraging Technology to Improve Skills Acquisition, Assessment and Validation" on page 18.) To build a more effective skills infrastructure, stakeholders should consider taking the following actions:

- **Establish consensus on skills definitions.** A common language across higher education and industry enables organizations to communicate skills consistently and more effectively.

- **Advance skills assessment methods and integrate them into core processes.** Improved methods of assessing skills—applicable both in higher education for evaluating student development and within businesses for assessing workforce capabilities—enhance alignment between educational outcomes and workforce needs. Higher education institutions should continue building skills-based learner profiles, leveraging technology and data to identify targeted learning opportunities, and encouraging alumni to pursue continuing education based on skill gaps. Similarly, businesses benefit from skills-focused interview analyses and regular skill assessments of their workforce.

By implementing those recommendations, stakeholders across sectors can deal more effectively with the challenges this report identifies and work towards creating impactful, sustainable partnerships that meet the evolving demands of the modern workforce.

Key Elements of Successful Partnerships

Business-higher education partnerships cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach. However, by operationalizing key success elements from the beginning, they can be poised to fulfill their ambitions, better prepare postsecondary learners for the future workforce, and boost the competitiveness of industry. BHEF's Key Elements of Successful Partnerships, listed below, are drawn from its deep expertise in the field and validated by the survey findings described in this report.

Strong Leadership and Structured Governance

- Align partnership goals and outcomes to ensure a shared vision.
- Provide appropriate financial support and resourcing.
- Secure executive buy-in to reinforce commitment.
- Define roles, responsibilities, and expectations.
- Agree upon clear return-on-investment metrics for each partner.
- Build sustainable business models for partnerships.

Key Elements of Successful Partnerships

Effective Communication and Processes

- Establish clear points of contact.
- Foster a culture of active listening and open-mindedness.
- Approach the partnership collaboratively and assume positive intent.
- Develop a consistent meeting structure, project management process, and feedback schedule.
- Leverage technology to enhance communication and track outcomes.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement and Use of Data

- Commit to identifying and resolving barriers as they arise.
- Expand partnerships by engaging additional stakeholders and/or embedding additional high-impact practices to broaden and enhance results.
- Use data strategically to measure progress, drive improvement, and report successes.

BHEF's Partnership Readiness Assessment for Higher Education Institutions

For more than four decades, BHEF has been fostering business-higher education partnerships across various industries. Based on this work, BHEF has created an assessment tool that examines the scope of partnerships across both higher education systems, public and private colleges and universities, and community and technical colleges. It covers various types of partnership modalities, including upskilling and customized training, work-integrated learning, and credential development.

The assessment tool evaluates to what extent higher education institutions have the foundational culture, resources, structure, and processes to establish and sustain meaningful employer partnerships. Ultimately, the tool allows stakeholders to:

- Gain insights into current industry partnership practices and identify opportunities for deeper collaboration;
- Understand their institution's capacity, where practices and policies are strong and where additional support may be needed to enhance industry partnerships; and
- Create an action plan for improvement according to the institution's goals.

The tool is divided into six sections to guide institutional teams through an assessment of current industry partnership practices and policies:

1) Fostering an Engaged Institutional Culture
2) Resource Allocation
3) Leveraging Data and Systems for Strategic Partnerships
4) Advancing Curriculum and Programs for Innovation
5) Implementing Industry-Driven, High-Impact Partnerships
6) Enhancing Career Transitions and Success for Students and Graduates.

BHEF recommends that institutions periodically re-evaluate their policies and practices to ensure ongoing alignment with industry, adapt nimbly to changes in institutional priorities and partnership dynamics, and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

To learn more about accessing and using the Partnership Readiness Assessment, contact Jennifer Thornton, senior vice president and chief programs officer, at Jennifer.Thornton@bhef.com

*The assessment tool evaluates to what extent higher education institutions have the foundational culture, resources, structure, and processes to **establish and sustain meaningful employer partnerships**.*
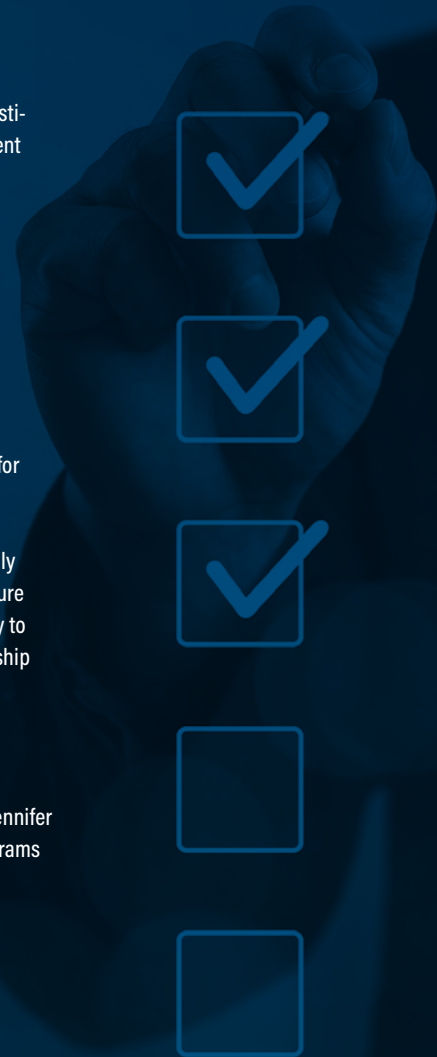
Partnerships in Practice

The following case studies profile high-performing and diverse examples of business-higher education partnerships that demonstrate how early integration of key success elements and a commitment to overcoming barriers drive results.

Share Your Partnership in Practice!
We want to hear from you about your innovative business-higher education partnerships. To submit information to be profiled in a future BHEF publication or resource, email info@bhef.com

Arapahoe Community College

Arapahoe Community College (ACC) is a Colorado-based college with campuses in Littleton, Castle Rock, and Lone Tree. Offering more than 70 degree programs across their three campuses and online—including bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and certificate programs—ACC served almost 20,000 learners in the 2023-24 academic year.

ACC is focused on cultivating innovative employer partnerships that achieve economic and social mobility for their learners, ensuring they connect to professional paths in the local economy. ACC stands out as an exemplar of strong partnership development, with three elements that have been crucial to its success.

Strong leadership and structured governance. When ACC leaders decided they wanted to sharpen their focus on promoting economic mobility and workforce innovation, powered by building strong employer partnerships, they did so in a strategic manner that facilitated success, through:

- *Securing executive buy-in to reinforce commitment.* The strong buy-in of ACC's president was a key first step in ensuring institutional alignment from the top-down. In addition to supporting initiatives to facilitate success, the president is actively involved in partnership development herself, regularly interfacing with top executives of key potential partner employers.
- *Strategic restructuring.* To better facilitate internal collaboration and coordination, ACC brought together all its external-facing departments (e.g., adult basic education, community education, upskilling, apprenticeship programs) and external support departments (e.g., career services, grantmaking) under one workforce division umbrella.

Effective communication and processes. To facilitate the continued cultivation of employer partnerships, ACC's team leverages clear communication and processes, including systematic and strategic use of relevant technologies. This includes:

- *Establishing clear points of contact. A*CC leaders recognized the importance of having a dedicated senior administrator focused on partnerships. As such, they named a Vice President of Economic Mobility and Workforce Innovation to lead this important work.

- *Fostering a culture of active listening and open-mindedness.* While structure and systems are crucial to its partnership strategy, ACC's leaders also recognize that developing partnerships is a human endeavor and that building a culture of open communication and iteration is just as crucial to establishing and deepening relationships over the long-term. As such, they consistently emphasize the value of listening closely to their partners. They understand that strong partnerships don't happen overnight and are thus willing to iterate and refine over the long term in close collaboration with their partners. This requires admitting when they're wrong and always being willing to try something again and adapt when necessary. In that way, ACC works to make things as easy as possible for its partners, gaining their respect and trust in the process.
- *Leveraging technology to enhance communication and track outcomes.* To effectively track and manage a number of partners and prospective partners that are all at various levels of engagement, ACC leverages a CRM system. This facilitates its team members' regular engagement with partners at the appropriate levels and supports them as they build relationships from lower to higher levels of engagement.
- *Using real-time workforce data tools.* The members of ACC's team leverage real-time data tools that enable them to determine local workforce demand across different industries/occupations, compare it to their portfolio, and make decisions accordingly. This allows them to stay apprised of market dynamics and pursue employers with relevant partnership proposals.

One partnership between ACC and a large healthcare company demonstrates how those principles come together to work in practice. Leveraging real-time data tools to monitor employer demand, the dedicated ACC team noticed a shortage of medical assistants. With that knowledge, it approached a large healthcare company seeking to hire medical assistants and offered to partner on a medical assistant apprenticeship program that proved mutually beneficial. By listening and being willing to continually adapt to the provider's evolving needs, ACC was able to deepen the relationship over time. The initial, singular program expanded to multiple programs, the provider made a sizeable gift to support ACC, and the two organizations continue to seek out new opportunities for collaboration in a strong and thriving partnership.

Blackstone LaunchPad®

Blackstone LaunchPad

In 2010, the Blackstone Charitable Foundation—the corporate foundation of asset management company Blackstone Inc.—created the LaunchPad program to improve career-building opportunities for college students. The program operates in partnership with higher education institutions, nonprofits, and employers, providing internships, work-based projects, and skills-building programs, all with a focus on entrepreneurship and innovation.

Over the past 15 years, LaunchPad has grown in scope and focus, with a consistent willingness to invest in higher education campuses, evolve to meet the changing needs of students and employers, and grow its impact by engaging relevant stakeholders throughout its network. The program's success is rooted in these key elements:

Provide appropriate financial support and resourcing. Since inception, the LaunchPad program has provided over $62M in grants to its institution partners to support programming on campuses. This support includes the ongoing distribution of a $40M commitment made in 2021 to expand programming to institutions that have a majority underrepresented population or are serving under-resourced communities. To date, Blackstone has made significant investments in historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and community colleges in order to fund programming and initiatives such as skills training, entrepreneurship competitions, and entrepreneurship accelerators, as well as increasing access to internships and professional networks.

Commit to identifying and resolving barriers as they arise. The LaunchPad program began as purely focused on entrepreneurship education and supporting aspiring founders. But over time, colleges began to dedicate more resources to entrepreneurship, and employers began seeking students with entrepreneurial skill sets. In response, Blackstone expanded to focus on broader career readiness education, with programming such as digital and on-demand skills building, and access to internships and careers. In this manner, LaunchPad continually evolves to address challenges and issues on its campuses. This is facilitated by creating a community of sharing and learning among its network, bringing together all their program directors for an annual conference to share challenges and successes and strategize how to overcome issues ranging from programming to bureaucracy to fundraising.

Expand partnerships by engaging additional stakeholders. Blackstone Charitable Foundation has been very intentional about engaging stakeholders across a variety of different sectors to expand and enhance the LaunchPad program. The program is built around higher education institutions, but it is fueled by participation of a large network of employers and aligned nonprofit organizations. Blackstone Inc. has a worldwide investment portfolio, with over 240 portfolio companies as of June 2024. LaunchPad has leveraged this network of companies to create opportunities for students including internships, work-based learning challenges dubbed "innovation sprints," professional development and coaching, and speaker series. LaunchPad also partners with nonprofits including Jobs for the Future, HBCU Founders Initiative, and Basta, all of whom help connect students with premier internship opportunities, entrepreneurial education resources, and career support. By leveraging the large network of portfolio companies and selective nonprofits, the program has been able to expand and accomplish more than it would otherwise if its participation limited to Blackstone Inc. employees alone.

LaunchPad's commitment to investing in their partner institutions, willingness to adapt and evolve to meet partner needs, and consistent focus on cultivating relationships across different groups of stakeholders has allowed them to garner significant impact over time, which as of December 31, 2023, includes:
- 78 LaunchPad campuses since inception
- 46 LaunchPad programs at minority-serving institutions
- 40,000 program participants in 2023
- $62 million+ grants distributed since inception

The City University of New York

As one of the largest public university systems in the United States, the City University of New York (CUNY) serves nearly 450,000 degree and non-degree-seeking students and is committed to providing its students with the skills to succeed in the workforce, as well as increasing economic mobility by working closely with employers. To manage employer engagement across 25 colleges, CUNY's Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships (OCIP) offers a streamlined "front-door" model through its Talent Innovation and Industry Partnership division. Within this division lives the Industry Support Hub, which acts as a single point of entry for businesses looking to recruit talent, engage with CUNY programs, or participate in industry-specific projects.

Establishing Clear Points of Contact. The Industry Support Hub is staffed by industry specialists focused on sectors like tech, non-clinical healthcare, the green economy, and business and finance. These specialists act as white-glove guides, helping employers understand and navigate CUNY's resources, determine their partnership needs and connect them with "good fit" partner campuses, departments, and faculty, while anchoring relationships with strong client management support.

Leveraging Technology to Enhance Communication and Track Outcomes. To support this approach, OCIP uses a robust data management system that tracks business needs and engagement, measures outcomes, and ensures consistent data collection across campuses. OCIP will continue to strengthen its unified partnership infrastructure by piloting an employer customer relationship management system to make it easier for industry specialists to better track and strengthen relationships over time.

Providing Appropriate Financial Support and Resourcing. OCIP also invests in campus- and department-level initiatives that advise students, engage faculty, and build business partnerships over time. The CUNY Inclusive Economy (CIE) Initiative, currently active on 15 departments across 9 campuses and expanding to 21 departments across 10 campuses, provides participating departments with an industry specialist and integrated academic and career advisor, strengthening campus capacity to foster business partnerships and guide students toward their career goals. Additionally, OCIP's centralized data management system is leveraged to track business engagement and student outcomes, provides a view into partnerships' depth, and aligns activities across campuses. This enables OCIP to rate partnerships based on engagement levels, facilitating both targeted outreach and long-term relationship-building. Through these insights, OCIP can better deliver on business needs while deepening partnerships to increase opportunities for students.

As a result of OCIP's approach to managing business engagement and the CIE, local partnerships are set up to succeed and flourish. A standout example is the partnership between the College of Staten Island and NineDot Energy, a local battery storage company. Initially, NineDot Energy approached the Industry Support Hub to recruit for a specific occupational need. However, through CUNY's consultative model, it became clear that NineDot Energy was looking for students with a strong engineering mindset and interest in their industry. The College of Staten Island's Engineering and Environmental Science Department, a participant in the CIE, offered a promising opportunity to identify interested students and build a talent pipeline. The partnership began with a series of meet-and-greets, a facility tour, and ultimately, as the relationship deepened, discussions around the future development of a dedicated internship program. This partnership provides a documented roadmap for similar collaborations, supporting NineDot Energy's workforce goals while creating valuable learning experiences for students.

CUNY's OCIP demonstrates the impact of combining a unified front-door model with strong data and client management systems. Through initiatives like the Inclusive Economy and targeted partnerships with businesses such as NineDot Energy, CUNY enables meaningful, career-aligned opportunities for students while supporting local economic needs. This model ensures that CUNY's expansive network can operate efficiently and collaboratively, building capacity for sustained, impactful workforce development across New York City.

EY-Alamo Colleges District

When EY opened its third internal service delivery center (SDC) in San Antonio, Texas in 2019, the company faced a roadblock: finding enough talent to staff the center. Historically, EY filled those positions with students graduating from four-year accounting programs. However, with a decline in such graduates nationwide—and a limited supply, in fact, of bachelor's degree talent in any field in San Antonio—EY needed a new hiring approach and turned to community colleges.

EY sought guidance from the Texas Workforce Partnership Initiative, a Business Roundtable program implemented by the Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF), to identify an ideal community college partner and help develop the pilot. Alamo Colleges District, responsible for 90% of San Antonio's associate degrees in 2022, was a clear choice. The partnership's success, and the hiring of almost 100 Alamo college graduates in the first three years, was established from the beginning based on:

Aligning partnership goals and outcomes to ensure a shared vision. Leaders from EY and Alamo together set an initial goal of recruiting 230 Alamo students into entry-level roles at the service delivery center within the first three years of the program. Both partners aligned goals and agreed to an outcome, which acted as a roadmap for the pilot.

Defining roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Working with a community college was new for EY, so the company had to adjust its expectations in terms of resources and staff time. It turned to BHEF to help translate each organization's goals into a common mission and to scope the process, timeline, roles, and responsibilities.

Agreeing upon clear return-on-investment metrics for each partner.
- **For EY:** The partnership met staffing needs, created cost efficiencies, and diversified its talent pipeline. According to Ellen Glazerman, executive director of the EY Foundation and director of university relations for EY Americas, the model became a replicable approach for similar programs nationwide.

- **For Alamo:** The partnership allowed them to show the value of an associate's degree and created a pathway for graduates to enter a globally competitive company. Alamo is now a trusted partner for industry and has a tested replicable model for partnership.

With these strong foundations, the EY-Alamo Colleges District partnership led to the hiring of 91 Alamo graduates in the first three years of the program. To learn more about the partnership, visit: https://www.businessroundtable.org/texas-workforce-partnership-initiative-the-ey-alamo-colleges-district-hiring-pilot.

Hudson County Community College— Eastern Millwork, Inc. and Holz Technik Academy

Eastern Millwork, Inc., a bespoke architectural millwork company, faced a growing talent gap that hindered the company's operations. Recruiting four-year graduates from mechanical engineering programs proved expensive, as new hires still needed substantial on-the-job training to meet the specific, highly specialized needs of Eastern Millwork, Inc. The company required a partner who could quickly develop a program tailored specifically to its needs—combining technology, manufacturing, woodworking, and creativity skills.

In June 2018, Eastern Millwork partnered with Hudson County Community College (HCCC) to develop an apprenticeship program. Launched in just seven months, the Eastern Millwork-Holz Technik Academy recruits high school students for a five-year paid apprenticeship program with full benefits and incremental raises. Apprentices receive on-the-job training while earning a tuition-free associate degree in advanced manufacturing from HCCC and a bachelor's degree from Thomas Edison State University. Upon graduation, they're guaranteed a $70,000 salary with full benefits and a pathway to higher level positions in engineering, project management, sales, and other areas.

Hudson County Community College was able to move fast, think creatively, and build a trusted relationship with Eastern Millwork, Inc. due to the institution's communication and effective governance.

Fostering a culture of active listening and open-mindedness. HCCC is dedicated to helping its students, many of whom work while learning and face barriers to completion, secure pathways to good jobs. HCCC fosters a culture of faculty and staff professional development, calculated risk-taking, and cross-departmental collaboration to build the internal capacity needed for impactful partnerships. This culture extends to HCCC's work with industry. When Eastern Millwork, Inc. needed apprenticeship candidates with immediate,

job-ready skills, HCCC responded by launching a new degree major, Advanced Manufacturing, and starting the program with major-specific courses instead of general education. This distinct approach engaged students in relevant skills from day one, directly addressing Eastern Millwork's urgent needs.

Approaching the partnership collaboratively and assuming positive intent. Lori Margolin, Associate Vice President of Continuing Education and Workforce Development at HCCC, credits the program's success to a spirit of collaboration: "We built a great foundation—not only in the program but in our partnership and relationship." Each partner brings their expertise to the table, ensuring mutual benefit and respecting one another's leadership in their areas of strength.

Identifying and resolving barriers as they arise. HCCC and Eastern Millwork collaborated closely at every stage, from development through recruiting talent. Recognizing the quick pace of industry, HCCC rapidly secured approval for and launched the degree program and then began offering courses in the major incrementally. Initially, the program was an industry-recognized apprenticeship, but it quickly transitioned to a registered apprenticeship program. Further, HCCC took the initiative to be the registered apprenticeship intermediary, handling all the paperwork and taking the burden off the business, while still giving apprentices the same benefits and protections.

As a result of HCCC's communication and effective governance, four apprentices have graduated with associate's degree, and one has also completed a bachelor's degree. Eastern Millwork is hoping to replicate the model and share it with peers as an example of best practices in partnerships, and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy has cited it as the blueprint for New Jersey's economic future.

TRAVELERS

Travelers EDGE Program

In 2007, Travelers launched an initiative, known as Travelers EDGE (Empowering Dreams for Graduation and Employment), to increase awareness of careers in the Insurance and Financial Services (IFS) industry. Through close partnerships with high schools, colleges, universities and community-based organizations in Hartford, Connecticut, and St. Paul, Minnesota, Travelers EDGE is focuses on:

- Increasing the number of students from local partner high schools attending college.
- Helping students graduate from college through scholarship support and academic advising.
- Building awareness of careers in insurance and financial services by providing a combination of professional development, internship and mentorship opportunities.

For more than 15 years, Travelers EDGE has demonstrated a **Commitment to Continuous Improvement and Use of Data**, enhancing the success of the program and its ability to better serve students, support the IFS industry's talent pipeline and deepen partnerships. The program's evolution includes these major elements (Yamashita, Franklin, & Cahalan, 2018): Enhanced Support at Critical Transition Points. Data revealed that students required additional guidance and resources at specific educational transitions, such as from high school to college and from college to employment. To address these needs, and working closely with staff at partner colleges, the program bolstered its support by expanding services like academic advising, professional development workshops and internships. This focus on transition helped to smooth students' progression through the academic pipeline and improve retention rates.

Increased Emphasis on Career Pathways in IFS.
Travelers has a history of supporting academic achievement and college success programs, and over time, the company refined its strategy to prioritize both college attainment and career pathways within the IFS industry. Using data on post-graduation employment outcomes, the program increased the availability of IFS-specific internships, mentoring from industry professionals and exposure to industry careers. This shift aligns with Travelers' corporate goals of creating a broad talent pipeline for the company and the industry.

Adapting Financial Support Based on Student Needs.
As college costs continued to rise, program data on financial barriers indicated a growing need for more robust financial assistance. Travelers EDGE increased its scholarship offerings and added stipends for professional development expenses. Data on students' financial stressors has guided this evolution, enabling the program to cover tuition costs and address gaps that might otherwise deter students from completing their degrees. For instance, in the 2024-2025 academic year, Travelers EDGE scholarships covered more than 60% of the total cost of attendance at partner colleges.

Building a Cohesive Community and Alumni Network.
Recognizing the value of peer support, Travelers EDGE used data from student surveys and feedback to build a stronger community among scholars. This led to the implementation of cohort-based activities, study groups and alumni networks, which have become critical for ongoing peer and professional support. The alumni network also serves as a resource for mentorship and career opportunities within the industry, contributing to the program's sustainability and impact beyond college graduation.

As a result of Travelers' ongoing, strategic use of data, proactively resolving barriers for students and expanding partnerships, Travelers EDGE has had an impressive impact (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2022, note: data reflects 2007-2022 time period):

- 563 scholars supported with scholarships or stipends.
- 314 individuals obtained bachelor's degrees.
- 35% of the graduates were hired at Travelers and 74% of graduates were hired by Travelers or other IFS companies upon graduation.

Looking Ahead

Aligning higher education with employer needs is critical to preparing the workforce of the future in a rapidly evolving labor market. Doing so requires collaboration and coordinated action among employers, educational institutions, community organizations, and state and federal policymakers.

Leaders in business and higher education recognize the importance of cross-sector collaboration and are making strides toward impactful partnerships. However, as this research highlights, progress often falls short of aspirations. The strategies, practices, and tools outlined in this report offer actionable solutions to overcome these challenges. At the Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF), we remain committed to supporting organizations in developing strong, sustainable, and results-driven partnerships.

Moving forward, our efforts must focus on fostering a shared understanding of labor market needs, designing innovative working and learning models, and providing tools and resources to strengthen partnerships. BHEF's network of education and business leaders is committed

to advancing this work and ensuring these strong, cross-sector alliances enable us to:

- Increase the number of learners completing programs with skills and credentials aligned with employer needs,
- Expand access to work-integrated learning models that prepare and connect talent with workforce opportunities, and
- Scale and implement these initiatives in partnership with regional networks and leaders.

As your organization builds inclusive, next-generation talent pipelines and upskills your current workforce linking higher education and employer needs, BHEF is here to help. Access free resources and playbooks, join our membership network, or explore tailored advising for your team at www.bhef.com.

Methods

BHEF applied a mixed methods approach to State of Skills and Partnership Research Study (SSPRS), consisting of two surveys and interviews, as follows:

Survey of Business Leaders

BHEF's 2024 State of Skills and Partnerships Survey of Business Leaders was fielded in September 2024 by a professional survey vendor. The survey received 380 complete responses from those who met the eligibility criteria. Most respondents (84%) worked at for-profit businesses, while 7% hailed from government, and 6% came from nonprofits. Forty-two percent of respondents were chief human resource officers, 30% were chief executive officers, and the remainder were distributed among other executive roles related to learning or education. Respondents came from a wide distribution of different-sized employers, with the most (42%) working at an organization with 1,000 to 4,499 employees. Compared to the general population of U.S. employees, as reported as of 2023 in Bureau of Labor Statistics data, respondents were skewed towards larger employers and slightly overrepresented in manufacturing, information, and finance/ insurance, while slightly underrepresented in healthcare and government.

Survey of Higher Education Leaders

BHEF's 2024 State of Skills and Partnerships Survey of Higher Education Leaders was also fielded in September 2024 by a professional survey vendor. The survey received 223 complete responses from those who met the eligibility criteria. Almost all respondents were from nonprofit institutions (94%) and a majority were from less-selective institutions, where more than 75% of applicants are admitted (61%). Respondents were split evenly between public (54%) and private (47%) institutions, and 31% of respondents were from community colleges, 13% from Hispanic Serving Institutions, 9% from Minority Serving Institutions, and 4% from HBCUs. Thirty-five percent of respondents were deans, 17% were directors, and 12% were vice presidents. Compared to all higher education institutions in the U.S., based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics as of 2023, the sample is slightly skewed towards public institutions and nonprofit institutions and away from private and for-profits institutions. Representation is proportional from community colleges, women's colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

Interviews

BHEF interviewed leaders involved in business-higher education partnerships from eight organizations These were in-depth interviews held with one to four leaders at each organization.

Labor Market Analysis

To identify the top skills in demand among employers, BHEF conducted an analysis of job postings data sourced from Lightcast, focusing on entries between May 2023 and May 2024. The dataset encompasses postings from non-staffing companies and, where specified, targets entry-level roles, specifically those requiring an associate or bachelor's degree with zero to three years of experience.

Skills Taxonomy Development

BHEF leveraged Lightcast's skills taxonomy to inform our survey questions and own skills taxonomy: business, durable, and technical. Each of these categories reflects specific attributes in employer demand:

- Durable skills: cross-disciplinary skills that are also referred to as human or soft skills and broadly valued in the workplace. They include skills like critical thinking, communication, and teamwork.
- Business skills: cross-disciplinary, general technical skills that most employees need; including skills for digital proficiency. They include skills like using Microsoft Office Suite, data analysis, and use of generative AI tools.
- Technical skills: skills that require specialized knowledge and expertise to perform certain tasks and are often associated with careers in STEM. They typically require specific domain knowledge and include skills like computer programming, creating AI algorithms, blueprinting, financial modeling, and medication administration.

These taxonomies guided the classification of skills, providing a consistent framework for analyzing demand across industries.

Projected Growth vs. Industry Diffusion

To evaluate the growth and spread of key skills, BHEF utilized Lightcast's Projected Skill Growth calculations, which forecast skill demand. Additionally, BHEF assessed industry diffusion by identifying how many six-digit National American Industry Classification System (NAICS) industries requested each skill in at least 100 job postings during the specified timeframe. This combined approach offers insight into both the rising importance and cross-industry relevance of specific skills.

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About the Business-Higher Education Forum

The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) is a national network that connects pioneering corporate and higher education leaders to co-develop solutions that address talent gaps. BHEF empowers and catalyzes collaborations that deliver accelerated, inclusive, and effective solutions across education and work. Business and university leaders join BHEF to lead innovation that meets the changing talent needs of learners, workers, and businesses. For our members and partners, BHEF:

- Convenes action-oriented summits and roundtables;
- Rapidly prototypes, implements, and scales talent solutions that bridge learning and work;
- Illuminates emerging talent needs and skills gaps; and
- Advocates for transformative business-higher education partnerships.

For more information about BHEF, visit **bhef.com**.

Authors

Stephanie Blochinger, Senior Director of Membership

Candace Williams, Director of Regional Initiatives

Madison Myers, Manager of Workforce Partnerships

Sean Crowley, Research Consultant

Kristen Fox, Chief Executive Officer

BHEF BUSINESS-
HIGHER EDUCATION
FORUM®

One Dupont Circle, Suite 360, Washington, DC 20036

📞 202.367.1189 | ✉ info@bhef.com | 🌐 www.bhef.com

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