



Improving Student Outcomes: Whose Job Is It to Close the Gap?

Results from a new Chegg research study of employers, college faculty, and college students

Abstract

Today's colleges face many challenges in helping prepare students for the workforce. As more students attend college and costs continue to rise, higher education institutions will be under increasing pressure to prepare students for the workforce. Gaps in workforce preparedness contribute negatively to employers' views of graduates, the reputation of colleges, and the well-being of young adults. There is a sense that college curricula are struggling to keep pace with the changing needs of the workforce.

Creating desired outcomes for students will require closer partnerships than exist today between institutions, industry, and students themselves. However, disagreement on the goals for higher education and where responsibility and accountability lie may be inhibiting this partnership from moving forward.

To delve deeply into these issues, Chegg commissioned a survey research project with Crux Research¹, a research consultancy well-known for its work in education. The goal of this new Chegg research is to explore beliefs around accountability and ownership in creating a hireable, attractive, ready-to-work population from U.S. colleges and universities. This study sheds new light on issues of workforce preparedness, the unique perspectives of faculty and employers, and the need for a new approach to the way faculty and employers work together.

Is College Worth It?

The past decade or so has seen an incredible amount of change in the role of higher education. Institutions are facing pressures from students, parents, and employers to provide a clear return on investment and to train employable graduates. There is a growing frustration that college may not be paying back. For example a recent study by Pew found that a majority of Americans (57%) feel the US higher education system fails to provide students with good value for the money they and their families spend.²

While the mission of higher education has always been broader than training students for their first job, a noted skills gap has emerged. Although studies have shown that going to college tends to pay back³, in the eyes of students and employers the reason to go to college has narrowed. According to Chegg research:

¹ www.cruxresearch.com

² *Is College Worth It?* Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, 2011: www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/05/15/is-college-worth-it.

³ *Education Pays 2013: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society* documents the ways in which both individuals and society as a whole benefit from increased levels of education. This report is available from the College Board at <https://trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays>. Also see *The Rising Costs of Not Going to College*, from the Pew Social & Demographic Trends at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college>.

- 70% of students indicate that the primary reason to go to college is to get a job.⁴
- 73% of students report that they are mainly attending college to gain skills employers value and are willing to pay for and 71% noted they are going to college mainly to gain greater earning potential.
- Although students appreciate the broader context of their education, just 43% say they attend college primarily to become a strong critical thinker. Even fewer are focused on getting a broad general education (32%).

We have additional reasons to be worried that this critical piece of the mission of higher education may not be succeeding:

- The unemployment rate for new college graduates last year was almost two and a half times what it was 20 years ago, and under-employment among recent college graduates is currently between 40% and 50%.⁵
- 42% of recent college graduates say that their first job did not require a college degree, and 40% said they did not get a job in their college major.⁶
- Average student debt is approaching \$30,000 for new 4-year college graduates.⁷ Student debt has risen faster than entry level salaries for college graduates.
- Most employers (69%) and faculty (71%) say recent graduates/students they have interviewed/worked with or taught have become more concerned with their higher education “paying back” financially.

A Difference of Perspective

The Chegg study indicates that the skills gap issue is complex. It is not as simple as educators and employers not being on the same page or educators being oblivious or unconcerned about the skills gap issue. Rather, both groups seem to recognize skills gap issues, but their perspectives are so different they define and treat the issues differently.

Faculty, employers, and students recognize that recent graduates aren’t fully prepared for the world of work. Although they feel things are getting better, they recognize that progress is slow and there is lot of work to do to close the skills gap. A NIMBY syndrome exists, particularly among college faculty. Is there is a skills gap in the US? Faculty are likely to say there is. But, they are far less likely to say this issue affects their institution’s graduates or the students they personally teach. This becomes a prescription for inaction. Faculty feel the skills gap is an important problem nationally, but not necessarily a problem for them locally.

While faculty and employers are in agreement that a core purpose of higher education is job preparation, faculty take a much longer, broader view of education. Faculty feel that the development of critical thinking skills and exposure to new ideas as central to the mission of higher education. Faculty seem to be looking beyond a student’s first job when thinking of the role of higher education.

Examples of this difference in perspective include:

⁴ Cheggheads User Survey 2014

⁵ *Are Recent College Graduates Finding Good Jobs?* From the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2014: http://www.newyorkfed.org/research/current_issues/ci20-1.pdf

⁶ Chegg and McKinsey & Company, *Voice of the Graduate*, May 2013: <https://mckinseysociety.com/voice-of-the-graduate>

⁷ The Institute for College Access & Success: *Quick Facts About Student Debt* March 2014: http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/pub//Debt_Facts_and_Sources.pdf

- Employers (and students) are more narrowly focused on an immediate concern of developing a qualified, employable individual. Employers care about more general skills, but within the perspective of how these skills manifest themselves in the students' first job with them.
 - Employers want immediate skills. They believe that a university's important priorities for a college are to produce job-ready graduates (54%) and critical thinkers (55%).
 - Employers also believe that the modern workplace demands basic technical proficiency. They rate the following skills as being important or critical for graduates to have:
 - Word processing: 89%
 - Spreadsheet software: 86%
 - Data analytics and business: 82%
 - Database (queries and intelligence manipulation) 81%
 - Personal information management (PIM): 77%
 - Presentation design, etc.: 76%
 - Software development environments: 65%
 - Visual design software: 60%
 - Web publishing: 59%
 - Video publishing/editing: 56%
- Employers tend to be less sanguine than educators as to how well colleges are doing. They are less likely to feel colleges are preparing students in skills they care about, that colleges are adapting to the modern economy, or that colleges place sufficient focus on job placement.
- Faculty take a broader view than employers or students of the purpose of a college education:
 - About half of college educators (53%) think it's primarily their job to teach job skills.
 - Instead, educators believe a university's primary purpose is to create strong critical thinkers (80%).
 - What's more, educators and students are more likely than employers to feel colleges are adapting to the job market and training students in skills employers want:
 - 64% of college faculty believe their institution focuses sufficiently on training students in the skills employers care about.
 - Only 41% of employers and 51% of students agree

All this said, there is less disagreement between faculty and employers over skills graduates need than might be anticipated. Both groups feel that working with data, software proficiencies, organizational skills and soft skills are necessary to successful employment. While faculty seem to place a greater emphasis on writing and communications skills than employers, largely the two groups are aligned in what they feel are important.

Yet, a skills gap persists. We find that employers seem to be unwilling to recognize that they have a role in partnering with colleges to help make students have the job skills they need. Faculty, on the other hand, seem willing to recognize the responsibility they have, but they simply don't have the day-to-day perspective required or the connections with employers they need to close the gap on their own.

So, Whose Job Is It?

The skills gap problem has many owners and will also need many solutions. Faculty and employers must recognize both the role they each play individually as well as the collective teamwork among them that successful closing of the skills gap will require.

- **Students** are likely to be looking to grown-ups (educators and employers) to teach them the skills they need. In our study, students said the responsibility to get them job-ready is primarily someone else's (45% educators; 35% employers).
- **Educators** tend to recognize their role in teaching job skills, but are also looking to fulfill a broader mission. While only half of educators think they're most responsible for teaching job skills (53%), they take even less responsibility for teaching the soft skills (41%) –skills which employers want (52%) and are critical to workplace success (like leading meetings, team work, etc.). That said, educators are quick to claim their own students are prepared for the workforce (57%) while claiming only 39% of 4-year graduates nationwide were prepared.
- **Employers** aren't necessarily taking responsibility or recognizing that educators can only teach relevant skills if they stay in close touch with the needs of employers. Employers say educators (39%) should be primarily responsible for teaching job skills to students (32%). Employers are reluctant to say it is their role to train students in soft skills (13%) or computer and technical skills (12%).

In sum, our study indicates that employers and educators recognize the skills gap issue. They recognize a need to work together to produce grads who are ready for the world of work. Our study shows that 80% of employers agree they need to work with colleges, 59% of educators agree they need to partner with businesses, and 58% of students think educators and businesses should work together.

What Can Be Done?

So, the issue does not seem to be one of differing priorities but rather one of differing perspectives, which cause significant “disconnects” that are preventing the issue from being resolved.

First, we must generate greater urgency to the skills gap issue, especially on a more local level. Yes, it is a matter of national importance. But, the skills gap is really a result of more local failings – a professor not truly knowing the real work implications of his content, or an employer frustrated with the lack of training of a new hire but who is too busy to do anything to work with higher education to improve the situation. The issue won't be resolved by top-down governmental policies. Rather, the skills gap will close as a result of many local efforts between colleges and employers.

We must promote more and deeper connections between higher education and industry. Faculty and employers in our study both agreed that these connections are important, and, in many cases, currently lacking in quality. Let's recruit more faculty from the business community. Let's have more guest lecturers from industry. Let's raise the profile of the career services department at colleges and have them become key liaisons to businesses.

We can connect education and employers through internships. Current internships are not rated highly by employers or educators. We suspect it is because the very nature of the internship needs redefining. Employers need to take some ownership – they suffer the consequences of the skills gap issue, and they need to forge closer ties with colleges to ensure that internships are relevant, build skills, and help bring the business perspective back to the classroom.

Supplemental education may play an important role. If colleges aren't providing the skills employers want, students will find ways to develop those skills on their own. A more robust supplemental education industry will evolve and may eventually provide the spark needed for higher education to provide a more relevant education for today's economy.

These issues are complex and urgent. Chegg's position is there are a number of actions stakeholders can take to do their part.

Higher education institutions can:

1. Modernize curriculum to be highly job-relevant.
2. Incorporate today's technology tools to make students more software proficient in the classroom, so they will be more proficient their first day on the job.
3. Invest more heavily in career services to the extent that you do for admissions or athletics.
4. Understand that the long-term value of addressing the gap now will be the determinate of the future success of your brand

Employers can:

1. Take a chance on today's students and don't sell them short – they are willing to learn.
2. Provide online and offline training.
3. Work with colleges to help them evolve their curriculum to best support students.
4. Be generous with internships. Give students real life experience before they hit the workplace.

Faculty can:

1. Modernize your curriculum so what you're teaching matches the needs and experiences in the outside world.
2. Keep close communication with your students to understand their changing needs.
3. Keep content relevant, and provide outlets for supplemental learning if students want to go the extra mile.

Finally, students can:

1. Supplement your college education with skills-based learning.
2. Understand the changing needs of your concentration – and what will make you stand out in the job market.
3. Invest in yourself.
4. Recognize that no one else is responsible for your future but you.

Methodology

This research project builds on previous Chegg work. Over the past several years, Chegg has conducted a number of studies⁸ which suggest that the undergraduate system may not be delivering value and core outcomes that are aligned to student expectations.

This project consisted of online surveys of two audiences: faculty and department chairs at colleges/universities and employers who hire college graduates. Chegg also conducted a short parallel study among current college students. Design and analysis were developed and prepared by Crux Research Inc. in consultation with Chegg.

This study was conducted online from March 27 – April 1, 2014. Password-protected email invitations were sent to prospective respondents. Employers qualified for participation if they worked full-time, had 2+ employees in their organization, and had either hired a new college graduate in the past 2 years or intend to do so in the coming year. Faculty qualified if they currently teach at least one college course, or if they have done so in the past two years.

⁸ In August 2013 Chegg commissioned an extensive survey of students and employers with Harris Interactive. Information from this project can be found at www.chegg.com/pulse.

The sample size was 410 for the employer survey, and 500 for the faculty survey. Individual interviews averaged 12 minutes in length. The Chegg student survey was conducted among 406 students. Students were 4-year and 2-year students who intended to enter the workforce upon graduation. For 4-year students, the sample was limited to current juniors and seniors.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Using the term “margin of error” can be misleading, particularly for studies that involve non-random samples such as this one. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, un-weighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because studies typically do not meet this standard. Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in online surveys. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in an online panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.