

GALLUP®



Aligning Education and Work

What Employers Say Higher Education Must Deliver

A LUMINA FOUNDATION-GALLUP PARTNERSHIP



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Introduction

In 2026, Gallup surveyed 2,000 U.S. employers to better understand their attitudes toward and perspectives of higher education. Employers included in this study made hiring-based decisions for their organization, included those employed full-time or part-time for an employer or who were self-employed and represented a variety of industries. The results are provided to inform policymakers, higher education leaders and workforce stakeholders about how employers view the state of higher education in the U.S. and the extent to which it is producing the talent employers need to be competitive.

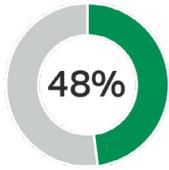
These findings build upon the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education study, which surveys thousands of current and prospective students annually and has reached tens of thousands of Americans over multiple years. The State of Higher Education research consistently finds that Americans value education beyond high school and believe it can help them achieve better career outcomes, even as many express concerns about cost, accessibility and other barriers to participation.

The employer perspective provides an important complement to student views and is a critical component of the national conversation about higher education and workforce development.

The findings in this survey indicate that employers continue to value higher education and expect degrees and credentials to remain important in hiring decisions.

At the same time, many report ongoing challenges in accessing a sufficient pipeline of candidates with the right skills and in preparing recent graduates for immediate effectiveness. For policymakers and education leaders, these results underscore both the enduring importance of postsecondary attainment and the need to strengthen alignment between education pathways and workforce demands.

Key Findings



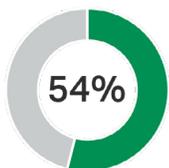
About half (48%) of employers believe most jobs at their organization require a college degree to be successful.



Three-quarters of employers say a college degree will be as or more important five years from now to get a good job at their organization.



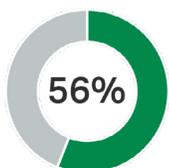
About three-quarters of employers say they would prefer candidates have an associate or bachelor's degree, even for jobs that do not formally require them.



About half (54%) of employers say U.S. colleges and universities are graduating students with the skills their organization needs.



Sixty-nine percent of employers say recent college graduates need a great deal or moderate amount of additional training upon hiring to be successful in their role.



More than half (56%) of employers say it's very difficult or difficult to hire candidates with the skills their organization needs.



About four in 10 employers say they have to hire foreign-born workers because of a perceived shortage of American workers with the skills their organization needs.

Main Findings

1 Employers report continued value of a college degree for job success at their organization.

Despite low levels of confidence in higher education nationally, employers are largely positive about the overall value of a college degree for workers at their organization, underscoring a continued alignment between postsecondary education and workforce needs. Nearly half of employers (48%) agree that most jobs at their business require a college degree to be successful, including 23% who strongly agree. A majority of these employers also believe these degrees or credentials will be as or more important to getting a good job at their organization over the next five years.

CHART 1

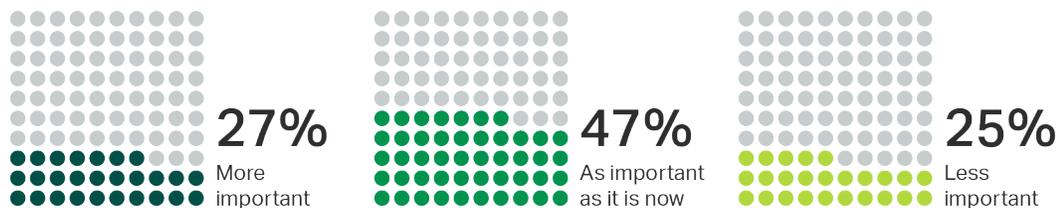
Most jobs at my business require a college degree to be successful.

■ % Strongly disagree ■ % 2 ■ % 3 ■ % 4 ■ % Strongly agree



CHART 2

In your opinion, in the next 5 years, how important will it be to have a college degree or credential to get a good job at your organization?



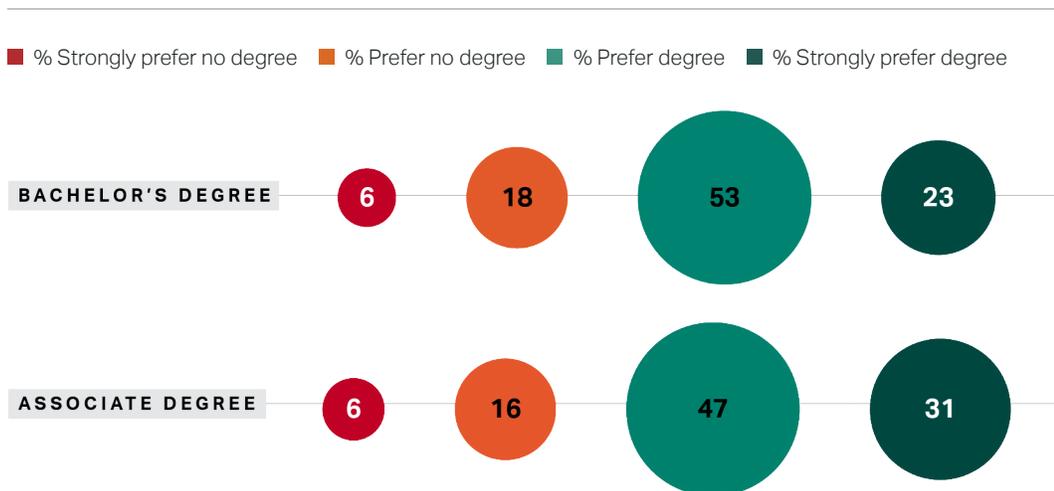
2 Employers prefer candidates have two- or four-year degrees despite efforts to remove degree requirements nationally.

Nationally, a growing number of organizations and states have questioned the need for postsecondary degrees for select jobs that have historically required them. Amid this national dialogue, about a quarter (23%) of employers say that, over the past three years, their organization has removed degree requirements from hiring for roles that used to require them. Another 20% say their organization is currently in the process of doing so.

Despite self-reported removal of degree requirements for many roles, employers report they continue to prefer candidates have two- or four-year degrees, even for roles that don't formally require them. About three-quarters of employers say they would strongly prefer or prefer a candidate had a bachelor's degree even if the role they're hiring for doesn't require one, and a similar proportion of employers say the same about associate degrees.

CHART 3

Employer preference for candidates' educational background, regardless of degree requirement



Employers with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely than their peers to prefer candidates have an associate or bachelor's degree themselves.

Eighty-nine percent of employers with a four-year degree or higher say they would strongly prefer or prefer a candidate have a bachelor's degree compared with 54% of those with less than a bachelor's degree. A majority of employers (61%) say they have a bachelor's degree or higher.

3 About half of employers feel U.S. colleges are producing graduates with the skills they need amid concerns that new hires require extensive training to be immediately successful upon hiring.

Despite positivity about the value of college degrees for their businesses, only about half (54%) of employers feel U.S. colleges and universities are graduating students with the skills their businesses need.

CHART 4

Colleges and universities in the United States are graduating students with the skills and competencies that MY business needs.

■ % Strongly disagree ■ % Disagree ■ % Neither agree nor disagree ■ % Agree ■ % Strongly agree



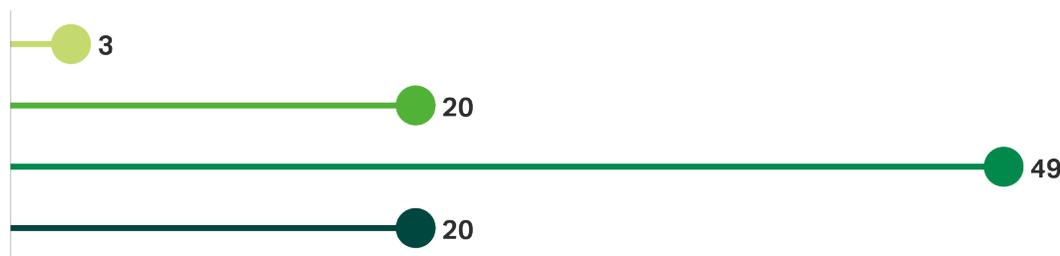
These results differ from students' confidence in the relevancy of skills they are learning in college. In the 2026 Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education study, 93% of current associate and bachelor's degree students are confident their school is teaching them the skills they need to get the type of job they want.

Employers' concerns about skill development among college graduates may be partially explained by concerns about the amount of training new graduates require to be successful on the job. About seven in 10 say recent college graduates require a moderate or great deal of training and skill development to be effective in their roles upon hiring.

CHART 5

Thinking about recent college graduates your organization has hired in the past 12 months, how much additional training or skills development did they require to perform effectively in their roles?

■ % None ■ % A little ■ % Moderate amount ■ % A great deal



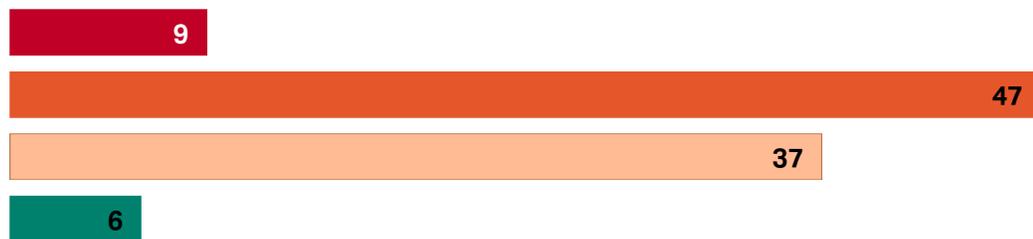
4 A majority of employers have difficulty finding candidates with the right skills and about a third rely upon foreign-born workers due to a perceived shortage of skills among the American workforce.

Fifty-six percent of employers nationally say it is very difficult or difficult to find candidates with the right skills for jobs in which they are hiring. Results are similar across organizations of varying sizes, underscoring consistency in hiring challenges throughout the workforce.

CHART 6

Thinking about the jobs you most often make hiring decisions for, how difficult, if at all, is it right now to find candidates with the right skills for these jobs?

■ % Very difficult ■ % Difficult ■ % Not too difficult ■ % Not at all difficult

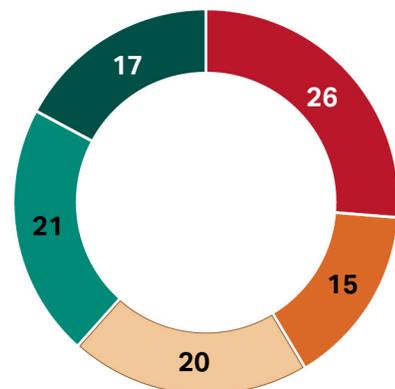


Nearly four in 10 (38%) employers say their business must hire foreign-born workers due to a perceived shortage of American workers with the skills they need. Reliance upon foreign-born workers is more pronounced among larger organizations. Employers working at organizations with 500+ employees are more likely than their peers to say their organizations must hire foreign workers. This pattern is likely explained by the greater variety of talents and skills these employers may require across their organizations.

CHART 7

Our business must hire foreign-born workers due to a shortage of American workers with the skills we need.

■ % Strongly disagree ■ % 2 ■ % 3 ■ % 4 ■ % Strongly agree



Conclusion

Taken together, these findings reinforce a clear message for policymakers, educators and workforce leaders: Employers still see higher education as a core driver of job success and talent competitiveness, even amid broader concerns about the ROI of a college degree. Yet employers' optimism about the value of degrees sits alongside persistent concerns about skills and readiness.

The relevance of these results is heightened by today's policy environment, where decisions in both education and workforce policy could materially shape talent pipelines. Changes to programs such as Workforce Pell have the potential to influence how quickly and equitably workers can access high-quality, job-relevant training, directly intersecting with employers' reported need for skills-aligned preparation and on-the-job upskilling. Similarly, shifts to employer-facing immigration processes, such as changes to H-1B visa application requirements, can affect how organizations fill critical roles when domestic supply falls short. Indeed, 36% of employers believe changes to the H-1B program will negatively impact their organization, while 24% anticipate the impact will be neutral, 26% say it will have a positive impact and 14% anticipate no impact.

Finally, the rapid proliferation of AI is poised to further disrupt workforce development, skill requirements and hiring practices. As AI tools reshape tasks and accelerate change in job design, employers' emphasis on credentials may increasingly coexist with heightened demand for adaptable, demonstrable skills — and for education-to-employment pathways that can evolve faster than traditional cycles. In this context, the survey results point to a durable opportunity: strengthening alignment between postsecondary providers and employers so that degrees and credentials retain their labor-market value *because* they reliably produce job-ready skills at the pace the economy now requires.

Methodology

Results from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup Employer study are based on a web-based survey conducted with 2,000 employers who make hiring decisions in the U.S. Gallup conducted the survey between Oct. 27 and Nov. 7, 2025. Respondents were sourced from an opt-in, professional panel. Employers were eligible to participate if they make hiring decisions in their current role. The credibility interval around point estimates for the entire sample of 2,000 employers is roughly ± 2 percentage points.

The credibility interval accounts for the design effect. The design effect describes the impact of weighting, which in this study was limited to adjusting states' representation in the final dataset. In addition to bias in the sample, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error into the findings of public opinion polls.

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