THE GOOD PROJECT

BEYOND JOB READINESS

WHITE PAPER

FINDINGS FROM THE GOOD WORK VALUE ALIGNMENT STUDY

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Executive Summary

What should a college credential prepare someone to do?

Public discussions of credential value often begin with employment: whether graduates secure jobs, what they earn, and whether those earnings justify the cost of college. These questions are important, but they capture only part of what students, employers, and institutions ask of postsecondary education. The Good Work Value Alignment Study therefore posed a broader question: How well does postsecondary education prepare people not only to obtain work, but to do good work?

Building on nearly a decade of Good Project research, we developed parallel employer and student survey instruments organized around nine dimensions of Good Work: Effort; Ethics; Relationship-Oriented Skills; Expertise and Skills; Purpose and Engagement; Learning, Growth, and Self-Awareness; Other-Oriented Impact; Recognition and Achievement; and Health and Wellbeing. These dimensions offer a more detailed, contemporary operationalization of the Good Project's longstanding framework of excellent, ethical, and engaging work; they are overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. We also examined perceptions of credential value and organizational culture. The Round 1 analytic sample included 1,347 respondents—403 employers and 944 students—across Architecture/Construction, Information Technology, and Healthcare.

The most consistent quantitative finding was a perceived mismatch between what good work requires and how well students are prepared to meet those requirements. In Round 1, both employers and students rated Importance higher than Preparedness on all nine dimensions, and every within-group gap was statistically significant under the study's Bonferroni-adjusted criterion. Employers reported larger gaps than students on seven dimensions; Purpose/Engagement and Health/Wellbeing were the exceptions. A much smaller Round 2 pilot reproduced the directional pattern of positive gaps across all nine dimensions for both groups, although the pilot was not sufficiently powered to reproduce most employer–student differences.

The qualitative findings clarify what this mismatch looks like in practice. Across the three sectors, participants valued postsecondary education for foundational knowledge, technical preparation, access to professional opportunities, and experiences that supported personal and professional development. At the same time, they repeatedly distinguished knowing from doing. Good work required graduates to integrate knowledge with judgment, communication, adaptability, ethical responsibility, curiosity,

collaboration, and self-awareness under the actual conditions of professional practice.

Internships, clinical placements, apprenticeships, capstones, simulations, authentic projects, mentorship, and related forms of experiential learning emerged as important bridges between formal education and professional work. The findings do not suggest replacing academic learning with narrow vocational training. Rather, they point toward a more integrated model in which students move repeatedly between knowledge and application, disciplinary expertise and collaboration, and technical competence and human judgment.

From this perspective, a credential has value not only because it can provide access to employment, but because it can help students develop the capacities, relationships, judgment, and experiences they will need to contribute responsibly and effectively once employed.



Rethinking What It Means to Be "Career Ready"

Higher education is under increasing pressure to demonstrate its value, and much of that discussion is understandably economic: tuition, debt, employment rates, wages, and return on investment (Carnevale et al., 2025; Detweiler, 2021; Parker, 2025; Saad, 2025). Yet the value of postsecondary education cannot be assessed solely by asking whether a credential helped someone obtain a job (Detweiler, 2021; Higgins, 2025; Schwartz, 2025; Strohl et al., 2026).

Employers need more than employees who hold credentials (AAC&U & Morning Consult, 2025; Cole et al., 2021; Swanek, 2025; Taylor, 2026). They need people who can use knowledge responsibly, collaborate across roles, respond to changing conditions, solve unfamiliar problems, continue learning, and produce high-quality work (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching & ETS, 2026; Carranza & Taylor, 2024; Stafford-Brizard, 2025; Taylor, 2025; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025). Students likewise enter postsecondary education not only to become employable, but to develop the knowledge, character, and capacities required to participate successfully, meaningfully, and ethically in professional life (Allan et al., 2016; Arthur & Earl, 2020; Detweiler, 2021; Gallup et al., 2026; National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2026).

This Study

The Good Work Value Alignment Study examined this space between credential attainment and professional contribution. It was guided by four questions:

1. How do students and professionals define good work and credential value beyond economic metrics?
2. How are these definitions informed by educational experiences?
3. Where do learners' and employers' perspectives align or diverge?
4. How do identity and institutional context—particularly race, gender, and career domain—shape these views?

Rather than reducing career readiness to technical competencies, the study examined preparation across nine dimensions of Good Work. Together, these dimensions encompass technical competence and quality as well as effort, ethics, relationships, continued learning, purpose, contribution to others, achievement, and wellbeing. This broader frame makes visible both what students may need from postsecondary education and the multiple ways in which a credential may have value.

Sample

The Good Work Value Alignment Study used parallel employer and student surveys in three occupational sectors: Architecture/Construction, Information Technology, and Healthcare.

Sector	Employers	Students	Total
Architecture/Construction	146	135	281
Information Technology	118	387	505
Healthcare	139	422	561
Total	403	944	1,347

Employers were recruited through Prolific and students through College Pulse; both surveys were administered in Qualtrics. Eligibility screening identified respondents who were currently employed in one of the target sectors or enrolled in a credential-bearing program connected to one of those sectors.

Respondents rated both the importance of capacities associated with Good Work and the extent to which students or recent graduates were prepared to demonstrate them. Employers assessed recent college graduates, whereas students assessed the preparation they had received through their own educational experiences. The study also examined credential value, organizational culture, demographic and contextual factors, and the psychometric properties of the measures. A second, substantially smaller pilot tested a revised administration and instrument.

Qualitative interviews and focus groups complemented the surveys by allowing students and employers to describe good work, credential value, educational preparation, and the transition into professional practice in their own terms. We analyzed the three sectors separately so that preparation could be understood within the distinct contexts of Healthcare, IT, and Architecture/Construction.

The two forms of evidence serve different purposes. The surveys identify broad patterns in perceived importance and preparedness; the qualitative findings illuminate what participants mean when they discuss preparation, professional competence, and the contributions and limitations of formal education.

Finding One: Students and Employers Agree That Preparation Falls Short of What Good Work Requires

The clearest quantitative result was also the most consistent: across all nine Good Work dimensions, both employers and students rated Importance higher than Preparedness. The pattern was not confined to technical expertise. It extended to effort, ethics, relationships, purpose, continued learning and growth, contribution to others, recognition and achievement, and health and wellbeing.

In Round 1, all nine within-group Importance–Preparedness gaps were statistically significant under the Bonferroni-adjusted criterion. Employers also reported significantly larger gaps than students on seven of the nine dimensions. These findings should not be read as a disagreement in which employers viewed graduates as unprepared while students viewed themselves as fully prepared. Both groups perceived a preparation gap; they differed more often in its magnitude.

The most consistent quantitative finding was a perceived mismatch between what good work requires and how well students are prepared to meet those requirements. In Round 1, both employers and students

Round 2 provided a limited but useful independent test of the central pattern. Under a revised administration in which respondents completed the full Good Work battery, every employer and student dimension again showed a positive mean gap. Seven employer gaps remained significant after Bonferroni adjustment, whereas none of the student gaps did so in the much smaller student sample. The pilot therefore supports convergence in the direction of the central finding, but it cannot establish replication of the Round 1 group differences.

This shared perception of a mismatch offers important common ground. Students and employers may enter the discussion from different positions, but both recognize that current preparation does not yet fully match the range of capacities they associate with good work.

Finding Two: Good Work Is More Than Technical Competence

The qualitative findings help explain why the preparation gap extends beyond technical expertise. Across all three sectors, participants described good work as multidimensional: technical knowledge remained essential, but its effective use depended on communication, judgment, reliability, ethics, adaptability, curiosity, collaboration, and responsibility to others.

Architecture and Construction: Competence Plus Judgment

Architecture/Construction participants distinguished competent task completion from work that makes a broader contribution. One professional described the difference succinctly:

"A good job meets expectations, but a good work adds value, shows initiative, and frequently improves the project for everyone involved."

Participants connected good work to craftsmanship and technical competence, but also to precision, curiosity, creativity, anticipation, communication, adaptability, safety, and a willingness to ask questions. Question-asking, in particular, functioned as a form of professional judgment. Because "not every job site's alike," strong workers recognized uncertainty rather than assuming that knowledge from one setting could be transferred unchanged to another.

Safety offered a particularly clear example of why knowledge alone is insufficient. Responsible workers needed to know relevant rules, but also to apply them under changing conditions, recognize when they lacked authorization or information, speak up about hazards, and consider how their decisions might affect others.

Healthcare: Competence and Care Are Interdependent

Healthcare participants similarly resisted any simple separation between technical competence and interpersonal practice. They associated good work with knowledge and attention to detail, but also with empathy, communication, reliability, teamwork, judgment, adaptability, ethical responsibility, and continued learning. As one employer explained:

"I think someone who does 'good work' stands out through a combination of professionalism and empathy."

Participants described these capacities operating together: remaining calm in a difficult situation, listening carefully to a patient, communicating with a team, advocating for someone's needs, recognizing when to seek help, and making responsible decisions under pressure. One nursing student framed the acknowledgment of uncertainty as a professional strength:

“You gain a lot of skills by admitting that you don’t know how to do something and learning from others because that demonstrates that we’re not perfect and that we all need guidance at times.”

Good work in healthcare, then, did not require independently knowing every answer. It required knowing when one did not know and responding appropriately.

Information Technology: Technical Brilliance Is Not Enough

IT participants also treated technical skill as necessary but insufficient. As one employer observed:

“You can be technically brilliant, but if you can’t communicate effectively or work with others, it creates frictions and slows everything down.”

Students and employers discussed teamwork, communication, professionalism, integrity, adaptability, and continued learning alongside technical competence. Employers placed particular emphasis on the qualities and values required to work successfully with others, whereas students more often described success through the concrete skills, knowledge, and experience needed to enter the field.

Across the sectors, the point was not that technical expertise mattered less. It was that good work depends on integration: professionals must bring knowledge together with judgment, relationships, responsibility, learning, and action.

Finding Three: The Credential Has Real Value—but a Credential Is Not the Same Thing as Readiness

Participants did not reject the value of college. Across the qualitative analyses, formal education was credited with providing foundational knowledge, technical preparation, professional access, exposure to a field, and opportunities for personal and professional development. They nevertheless distinguished these contributions from complete readiness for workplace performance.

Architecture and Construction

In Architecture and Construction, Credential Value Depends on the Role
Architecture/Construction illustrates why credential value cannot be treated as uniform even within a single sector. The qualitative sample encompassed roles connected to architecture, engineering, planning, construction management, surveying, skilled trades, and site-based work. Participants described degrees as highly relevant or necessary for some pathways, whereas trade preparation, certifications, and demonstrated practical competence carried greater day-to-day weight in others. As one professional explained:

"So I'd say the degree helps, but it's not everything. practical ability is what really counts day to day on site."

Formal qualifications could support technical understanding and advancement into particular positions; practical competence determined whether that knowledge could be used safely and effectively under actual site conditions.

Information Technology

In IT, the Degree Can Function as a Gateway
IT students emphasized another form of credential value: access. They described positions for which a degree functioned as an entry requirement and automated screening processes that they believed excluded applications lacking degree language before human review. At the same time, students and employers emphasized that a degree alone did not demonstrate the applied experience required for many positions. A credential could therefore be necessary for access without being sufficient evidence of readiness to perform.

Healthcare

In Healthcare, Formal Preparation Provides the Foundation for Continued Development
Healthcare students described coursework as providing scientific, disciplinary, and role-specific foundations. Clinical and other applied experiences then helped them learn to use that knowledge with patients, colleagues, organizations, and real constraints.

Employers likewise described readiness as a combination of academic preparation, practical experience, communication, care, and willingness to learn.

Across sectors, participants were not debating whether credentials have value in the abstract. Their accounts instead raise a more specific question: What does a credential enable someone to know, access, and become, and what must still be learned through participation in the work itself?

Finding Four: The Critical Transition Is From Knowing to Doing

A common theme across all three qualitative analyses was the difficulty of translating formal knowledge into situated performance. Students and employers distinguished learning concepts, procedures, and technical material from using them when circumstances are ambiguous, fast-moving, interpersonal, or consequential.

Architecture and Construction

A construction professional described what can happen when technical representation becomes disconnected from physical understanding:

"People lose sight of the scale and they just draw; numbers just become numbers to them."

The concern was not simply whether graduates could manipulate technical information, but whether they understood what that information meant for fabrication, transportation, installation, safety, and the physical realities of a job site. Internships, apprenticeships, and site-based experience were valued because they helped bridge knowing and doing.

Healthcare

Healthcare students described a parallel transition. One nursing student explained:

"Therapeutic communication… is what they teach us a whole lot, but you never really experience it until you learn it on the field."

Clinical placements and internships introduced forms of complexity that textbook examples cannot fully reproduce: patients who present differently, incomplete information, interruptions, competing demands, emotional responses, time pressure, and decisions with real consequences.

Information Technology

IT participants likewise distinguished theoretical understanding from the ability to troubleshoot and solve actual problems. One employer described a graduate who "understood concepts in theories" but struggled to configure devices or troubleshoot network problems. Students identified capstones, hackathons, internships, and project-based experiences as valuable because these settings required them to work with real or realistic problems, technologies, teammates, deadlines, and stakeholders.

Across sectors, the challenge appears less like a straightforward lack of knowledge than a problem of integration: students need repeated opportunities to combine what they know with what particular situations require.

Finding Five: Experiential Learning Is Not an "Extra"

Experiential learning appeared consistently across the qualitative findings. Architecture/Construction participants described internships as "priceless." Healthcare participants called for additional clinical placements, simulations, internships, and partnerships with healthcare organizations. IT students and employers highlighted internships, capstones, hackathons, industry mentorship, and trainee programs.

The value of these experiences was not limited to resume-building. They exposed students to dimensions of work that are difficult to reproduce through conventional instruction:

- uncertainty and changing conditions;
- real clients, patients, users, or stakeholders;
- interdependence with coworkers and other professions;
- consequences for mistakes;
- organizational systems and constraints;
- time pressure and competing priorities;
- professional feedback;
- increasing responsibility and autonomy; and
- opportunities to determine whether a particular career fits.

Participants also emphasized the design and timing of experience. In Architecture/Construction, they called for professional exposure to begin earlier rather than being confined to a late-program internship. Healthcare participants wanted experiences that better reflected the complexity of practice, including incomplete information, multiple demands, communication, prioritization, and decisions under pressure

IT participants described capstones as especially valuable when students worked in teams, made technical choices, interacted with project managers, and completed projects resembling professional work.

Experiential learning should therefore not be treated as an optional supplement to an otherwise complete program. For many capacities associated with good work, appropriately structured experience is one of the settings in which the capacity itself develops.

Finding Six: Employers and Students Are Looking at the Same Transition From Different Ends

The findings do not place students and employers in fundamentally opposing camps. The qualitative evidence shows substantial agreement about the capacities that good work requires; differences often reflect vantage point. Students can describe what their programs teach, where they feel confident, what they wish they had learned, and which experiences make professional work more intelligible. Employers observe what happens when graduates encounter deadlines, patients, clients, systems, teams, physical constraints, uncertainty, and responsibility.

In IT, students discussed university preparation more extensively and identified gaps in specialization, practical experience, interview preparation, mentorship, and attention to AI. Employers focused more heavily on the ethical values and characteristics workers need to demonstrate after hiring. Architecture/Construction showed a related pattern. Communication Skills included 64 employer and 22 student coded references; Importance included 59 employer and 11 student references; and Gap included 37 employer and 6 student references. Value of the Credential reversed the pattern, with 50 student and 32 employer references. These figures describe prominence within the coded material, not the proportion of participants expressing a view; passages could receive multiple codes, and participants could contribute more than one coded passage.

Healthcare accounts similarly reflected shared underlying values viewed from different points in the transition. Students often described the professionals they hoped to become, while employers described how those qualities must operate under workplace conditions.

The quantitative results also caution against treating these perspectives as interchangeable. Although employers generally reported larger gaps, full scalar employer–student measurement invariance was not established for any Good Work facet. Raw employer and student scores therefore should not be assumed to represent perfectly equivalent measurements of identical latent constructs.

Neither group offers a complete benchmark on its own. Students have direct knowledge of their educational experiences; employers have direct knowledge of the settings in which that education must be applied. An account of credential value requires both perspectives.

Finding Seven: Greater Perceived Credential Value Is Associated With Smaller Preparation Gaps

The predictive analyses provide an important complement to participants' qualitative accounts of credential value. In Round 1, higher overall Credential Value ratings were associated with smaller overall Importance–Preparedness gaps among both employers and students. A combined model found no significant respondent-group difference in the Credential Value slope.

This relationship is correlational. It does not show that increasing a person's belief in the value of college would cause better preparation or a smaller perceived gap. It does, however, indicate that perceptions of credential value and preparation for good work are meaningfully connected in these data: respondents who saw greater value in higher education also tended to perceive closer alignment between what good work requires and the preparation students receive.

The association was not identical in every context. Among employers, the Credential Value relationship differed in Healthcare relative to Architecture/Construction; the corresponding Information Technology interaction was not significant. Among students, neither sector interaction was significant. The results therefore support attention to occupational context, but they do not justify a general claim that credential value operates fundamentally differently across all three sectors.

The more useful question may be not simply whether college is "worth it," but worth it for what, in which field, through which experiences, and in preparation for what kind of work.

Finding Eight: Preparation Must Keep Pace With Changing Fields

Preparation for good work cannot remain static when fields themselves are changing. This issue was especially visible in IT. Students described AI as changing expectations for entry-level workers; one characterized it as "raising the skill floor." They also reported limited or nonexistent AI preparation and, in some cases, tension between educational restrictions on AI and workplace expectations that graduates know how to use emerging tools.

Architecture/Construction participants raised a related concern about curricular lag. A student with prior industry experience described the risk that technical programs could become outdated when software and industry standards changed more quickly than curricula. Employers, however, also identified technological fluency as a relative strength among newer graduates. The issue was therefore not simply whether students learned technology, but whether their technical fluency remained current and connected to practical understanding.

Preparing students for changing fields requires more than periodically adding new tools to the curriculum. Programs also need to cultivate continued learning, critical evaluation, responsible adaptation, and the capacity to recognize when existing knowledge is no longer sufficient.

Implications for Postsecondary Education

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest several principles for strengthening the relationship between credential attainment and preparation for good work.

Make experiential learning part of the architecture of a program.

Authentic practice should not depend entirely on whether students can independently secure internships. Programs should consider how clinical placements, internships, apprenticeships, capstones, simulations, project-based learning, and community or industry partnerships can be integrated deliberately across the educational experience.

Treat communication, ethics, adaptability, and judgment as professional capacities.

Across all three sectors, communication, ethics, adaptability, and judgment were not peripheral "soft skills." They shaped workflow, safety, patient care, client relationships, problem-solving, teamwork, and the quality of professional outcomes. Programs should therefore embed practice and potentially assessment of these capacities within disciplinary learning rather than confining them to generic professional-development activities.

Design experience around integration, not exposure alone.

Workplace placement alone does not ensure learning. Strong experiences create opportunities to make decisions, receive feedback, collaborate across roles, encounter constraints, reflect on mistakes, and assume increasing responsibility.

Introduce authentic professional contexts earlier.

Students may benefit from encountering authentic professional problems before the final stages of a program. Earlier exposure can clarify the relevance of academic content, make areas for further development more visible, and support better-informed decisions about possible career pathways.

Implications for Postsecondary Education

Build stronger bridges between educators and practitioners.

Participants across sectors called for greater contact with working professionals. Industry mentors, practitioner-instructors, employer partnerships, clinical preceptors, alumni, and collaborative projects can help students understand how disciplinary knowledge operates within contemporary professional settings.

Keep curricula responsive without chasing every trend.

Rapid technological change requires continued curricular review, particularly in IT and technology-intensive areas of Architecture/Construction. Responsiveness, however, should not be reduced to training students on the newest available tool. Contemporary technical fluency needs to be paired with durable capacities for learning, judgment, critical evaluation, and adaptation.

Support the transition into employment itself.

Preparation also extends across the transition into employment. IT students called for stronger interview preparation, career counseling, internship support, and exposure to industry professionals. A smaller set of healthcare employer accounts described development through onboarding, shadowing, feedback, and experienced colleagues. These findings suggest a need for colleges and employers to consider jointly how formal education connects with early-career learning.

Help students see how their education connects to good work.

Credential value extends beyond employment access and economic return. Programs can help students make explicit connections among coursework, experiential learning, professional formation, and the capacities required for high-quality, ethical, collaborative, meaningful, and responsible work.

Implications for Employers

The findings also resist placing responsibility for readiness entirely on colleges. Some forms of professional competence develop through participation in work itself, which gives employers an important educational role.

Structured onboarding, mentorship, graduated responsibility, useful feedback, and environments in which new employees can acknowledge uncertainty and ask questions may help graduates translate educational preparation into professional judgment. Several capacities participants associated with good work—including recognizing when to seek help, adapting to unfamiliar circumstances, coordinating across roles, and making decisions under pressure—cannot be fully developed before a person enters the environments in which those capacities are exercised.

The transition from student to professional is therefore better understood as a shared developmental space between education and employment than as a fixed boundary at which responsibility passes completely from one institution to another.

Context Matters

Neither “the college credential” nor “career readiness” has precisely the same meaning in every context. Architecture/Construction encompasses occupations with different educational requirements, regulatory structures, technical demands, and pathways into employment. IT changes rapidly and places particular pressure on curricula to remain current. Healthcare includes professions in which licensure, clinical preparation, patient responsibility, and emotional demands shape what readiness entails.

The quantitative findings similarly indicate that context matters. Among employers, the association between Credential Value and the overall Good Work gap differed in Healthcare relative to Architecture/Construction. Separate and combined moderator models also linked perceived gaps to entry-level educational requirements and, in some specifications, certification or licensure expectations, hiring responsibility, and organizational characteristics. Entry-level educational requirements were the most consistent employer organizational moderator in the combined models.

Findings related to identity require considerably more caution. The technical report identified some age and race patterns in reduced models, but group-related results were not consistently established after sector and its interactions were added; gender findings were also limited and inconsistent. These analyses are best treated as provisional evidence that respondent characteristics and context may matter, not as support for simple demographic explanations of preparedness.

A New Question for Credential Value

The Good Work Value Alignment Study began by asking whether employers and students were aligned. Its findings suggest that an equally important challenge lies in how preparation is defined.

If career readiness means possessing enough knowledge to qualify for an entry-level position, many capacities described by participants remain outside the frame. Readiness for good work is more expansive. Students need expertise, but also the judgment to recognize when that expertise is insufficient. They need independence alongside collaboration and help-seeking; technical fluency alongside responsible use; and knowledge of established procedures alongside the ability to respond when circumstances do not fit them. They need to enter the workforce prepared to continue learning and to consider not only whether they can perform particular work, but whether that work is meaningful and sustainable for them.

The Importance–Preparedness gap should not be understood simply as a deficit to be addressed by adding more content to an already crowded curriculum. It invites closer attention to the relationship among education, experience, and work.

The findings support a model in which colleges provide strong intellectual and disciplinary foundations while creating repeated opportunities for those foundations to be applied, tested, reflected upon, and refined in increasingly authentic contexts.

This does not require colleges to reproduce the workplace, nor does it support an expectation that graduates should arrive fully formed. It does require educational institutions and employers to recognize the transition into professional practice as a shared process of development.

Within this model, part of a credential's value lies in the doors it opens. Its fuller value also depends on how well students are prepared for what they will be asked to do after those doors open.

From Career Readiness to Readiness for Good Work

The findings point toward a broader ambition for postsecondary education. The goal is not only to prepare graduates who can obtain employment, but to prepare people who can do work well: work grounded in expertise, attentive to high standards and to other people, responsive to changing circumstances, guided by ethical judgment, and capable of continued development.

This is a more demanding account of credential value. It is also one that more closely reflects what students and employers in this study described as necessary for good work.

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