

# Utah Workforce Alignment Study

Talent Ready Utah and USHE

Prepared by Cicero Group®

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Report Objectives

Talent Ready Utah and The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) partnered with Cicero Group to assess how effectively higher education graduates are meeting workforce demands, with a particular emphasis on gathering insights from employers across key industries.

The objective of this study was to help identify areas of improvement and provide actionable recommendations to enhance and sustain higher education's responsiveness to and alignment with the needs of employers in Utah.

The 4 primary objectives of Cicero's work were to:

1. **Define Employer Expectations:** Collect and define the expectations that Utah's private sector has of graduates from Utah's institutions of higher education.
2. **Evaluate Graduate Quality:** Evaluate the quality, preparedness, and effectiveness of graduates from Utah's postsecondary institutions.
3. **Explore Industry Needs:** Understand the unique needs of employers by industry, such as: healthcare, life sciences, aerospace, financial services, computer sciences, advanced manufacturing, energy, retail, hospitality, transportation, and construction.
4. **Deliver Actionable Solutions:** Provide actionable recommendations to improve the alignment of higher education with the needs of employers in Utah.

# 2. Methods

## 2.1 Project Phases

Cicero's methodology for data collection on this project consisted of three phases: initial interviews, survey collection, and follow-up interviews. This structure allowed Cicero's research team to get a general sense of graduate readiness in Utah and incorporate those findings into the survey's design. The survey was also utilized as a recruitment tool for a series of follow-up interviews that were useful in validating hypotheses and exploring new findings uncovered in the survey.

### 2.1.1 Interview Methodology

To ensure accurate and relevant insights, interviews were conducted with employers who directly hire, supervise, or manage recent graduates.

In the initial round of interviews, employers were asked open-ended questions to explore a broad range of perspectives on the workforce readiness of recent graduates. Cicero's team, in collaboration with Talent Ready Utah, developed a flexible interview guide to shape these discussions. This guide was used informally, allowing interviewers to adapt questions based on the expertise and experiences of each participant.

These conversations uncovered key areas of concern among employers, including gaps in durable and technical skills, a shortage of work-based learning opportunities, and areas to improve partnerships between industry and higher education. These findings informed the design of a subsequent survey to explore these themes in greater depth.

After the survey, a second round of interviews was conducted with select survey respondents who expressed interest in a follow-up discussion. These interviews followed a similar approach to the initial round of interviews, using a structured yet flexible guide tailored to the interviewees' expertise. However, unlike the first round, the focus was on expanding, contextualizing and validating the survey's quantitative findings rather than uncovering new areas to explore.

This two-phase approach to interviews ensured a comprehensive understanding of employers' perspectives while also refining the insights gathered.

### 2.1.2 Survey Methodology

The survey was representatively distributed across all regions and industries in Utah to analyze the initial findings from the interviews. It covered industries representing 85% of NAICS codes and proportionally included responses from all of Utah's geographic regions.

Cicero applied its expertise in survey design to create a structured questionnaire aimed at reducing bias and increasing clarity. Questions were carefully ordered and worded to ensure consistency, reduce bias, and minimize subjectivity. To standardize responses, key terms were clearly defined, and survey logic was used to focus on topics that matched the respondents' expertise. Additionally, participants had the option to select "N/A" or "I don't know" to avoid forcing responses on unfamiliar topics.

The most detailed part of the survey focused on the specific skills that graduates need for workplace success. Cicero and Talent Ready Utah identified these skills using multiple sources, with a strong emphasis on insights from initial interviews and industry-specific skill lists from the O-Net database. O-Net's extensive catalog of skills, which covers thousands of occupations, was used to inform the lists of industry-specific skills shown in the survey. These skills were grouped by industry and, when necessary, summarized or generalized to reduce the number of choices respondents saw through the course of the survey.

## 3. Results

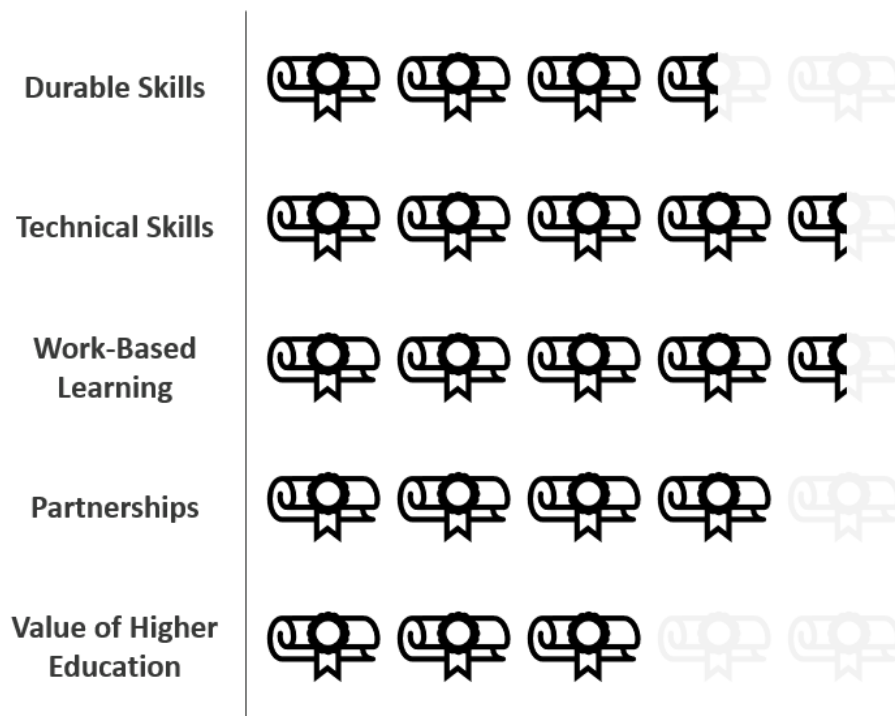
### 3.1 Industry Evaluation of Higher Education

Utah's higher education system is widely regarded by industry as successful in preparing graduates for the workforce. Employers consistently praised graduates' strong technical skills, higher education's openness to partnering with industry, and the effectiveness of graduates coming from work-based learning programs.

The study also identified four key areas where Utah's higher education system could improve. Addressing these opportunities would support continuous improvement and help maintain Utah's status as a national leader in higher education. Employers highlighted several areas for improvement, including gaps in graduates' durable skills, variable quality of technical skills across industries, a strong desire for greater collaboration between industry and higher education, and the critical importance of work-based learning for graduates' success.

**Figure 1: Industry's Evaluation of Higher Education**

*Summary of both quantitative and qualitative data collection*



## 3.2 Recommendations

To address the areas of improvement identified by employers, Talent Ready Utah and USHE should prioritize the following recommendations, which are drawn from employer feedback, secondary research, and Cicero's higher education expertise. The recommendation categories are presented in order of priority.

### Durable Skills

- 1) Provide more opportunities for rigorous and consistent development of durable skills in curricula and study programs. This includes graded opportunities such as presentations, group work, and technical writing projects, ideally centered around real-world scenarios developed in conjunction with industry.
- 2) Institutionalize and emphasize un-graded opportunities for students to develop durable skills such as regular face-to-face feedback with professors and advisors, mimicking feedback loops in the workplace.

**Work-Based Learning**

- 3) Design ‘starter kits’ that workplaces can use to quickly implement work-based learning (WBL) programs onsite.
  - These starter kits will provide best practices and guidance regarding:
    - I. Engaging an academic institution throughout the program
    - II. Evaluating and reporting on student employees’ progress
    - III. Interacting with and managing student employees
    - IV. Mentoring student employees
    - V. Giving student employees meaningful work responsibilities without compromising delivery
    - VI. Leveraging WBL programs for effective recruiting, hiring, and retention
- 4) Increase the visibility of work-based learning successes through marketing and publication of WBL success stories.
- 5) Systematize the implementation of WBL in higher ed. outside of internships, e.g., apprenticeships, externships, co-ops and practicums.

**Partnerships**

- 6) Create a function that facilitates relationships between higher ed and industry to implement feedback smoothly and quickly into higher ed. Industry partners who care to engage should be given opportunities to do so.
- 7) Early awareness is crucial for technical industries, especially those with extensive training and accreditation requirements, and should be introduced early across postsecondary and even secondary education.

**Technical Skills / Accreditation**

- 8) Create independent credentialing boards staffed by industry professionals to maintain strong alignment between higher ed and industry.
- 9) The increasing prominence of micro-credentials creates an opportunity for higher ed to lead out on defining and operationalizing many credentials. This can help close gaps in technical skills for better workforce alignment.

## 3.3 Skills Breakdown

**Introduction**

The skills breakdown section presents findings from the survey which assess Utah employers’ perceptions of recent graduates’ preparedness for the workforce. The findings in this section highlight strengths and key areas for improvement for higher education when developing graduates’ skills for the workforce.

Employers were asked to rate their expectations for graduates across four skill categories: business skills, interpersonal skills, technical skills, and industry-specific technical skills. Using a 7-point scale, respondents assessed the proficiency level they expect graduates to achieve, from “inexperienced” to “master.” Then, on the skills employers rated as graduates needing to be

“proficient” or above, employers were asked to rate how graduates meet these expectations, ranging from “far below expectations” to “far above expectations.”

In the same manner, the survey also examined skills deemed essential by Industry today, which will become more or less critical over the next 5–10 years, providing insight into future workforce needs.

The study explores several additional topics, including respondents' views on outdated skills taught by higher education across key industries, the joint responsibility of higher education and workplaces in developing durable skills, the value and awareness of micro-credentials in industry, and the impact of AI on the workforce.

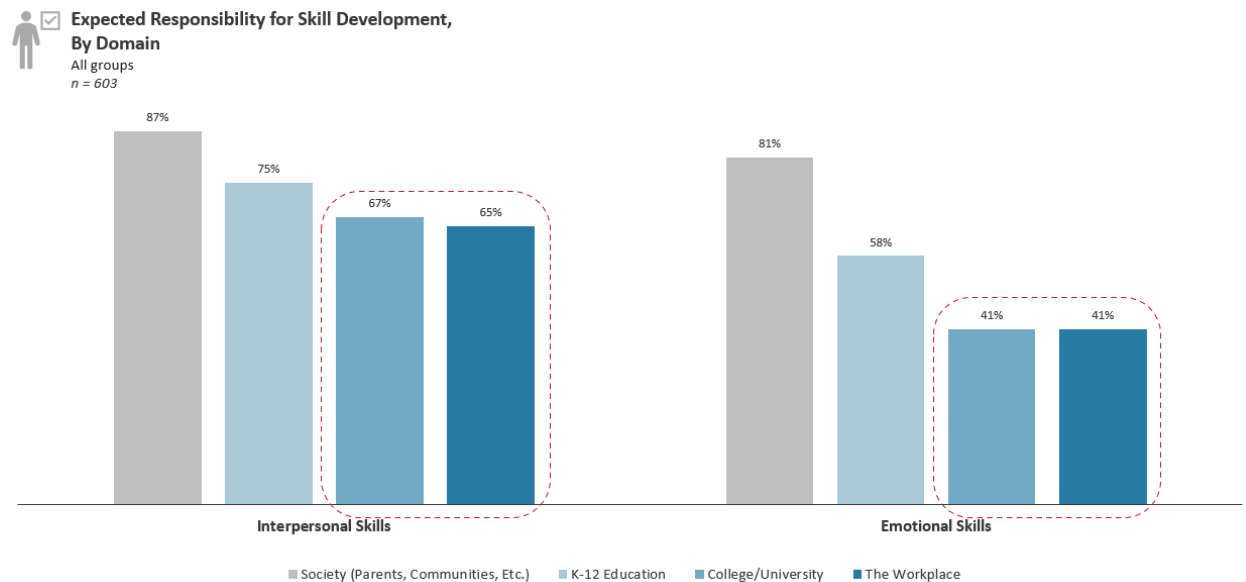
Findings are segmented by industry, highlighting areas where certain sectors diverge from broader trends. Additionally, insights from the qualitative interviews and free-response sections are added to give context to quantitative findings. These findings offer a detailed and actionable perspective on how higher education can better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of Utah’s workforce.

### 3.3.1 Durable Skills

#### **The Importance and Challenges of Developing Durable Skills**

Durable skills are transferable, long-lasting capabilities that are highly valued across industries and roles, including interpersonal skills and emotional skills. They are named durable skills, because while technical skills may become outdated with technological advancements, durable skills remain relevant throughout an individual’s career. These traits are sometimes referred to as soft skills, but for this report the term durable skills will be used.

Durable skills have emerged as a significant area of opportunity among recent graduates; a challenge noted across all industries in the state. This trend is not unique to Utah but reflects a growing national concern. While industry believes that higher education institutions are both capable of and responsible for equipping students with durable skills, they also recognize that this responsibility is shared. Employers understand the need to contribute to the development of these skills as graduates transition into the workforce.

**Figure 2: Industry Expectations for Durable Skill Development**


### Durable Skills Areas of Improvement

Within the realm of durable skills, several areas require improvement. These include industries where graduate proficiency in durable skills falls below average, as well as specific durable skills that employers consistently find lacking among recent graduates.

First, the industries with graduates that fall below average in durable skills are Aerospace and Advanced Manufacturing.

**Figure 3: Industry's Evaluation of Graduates' Durable Skills; By Key Industry**

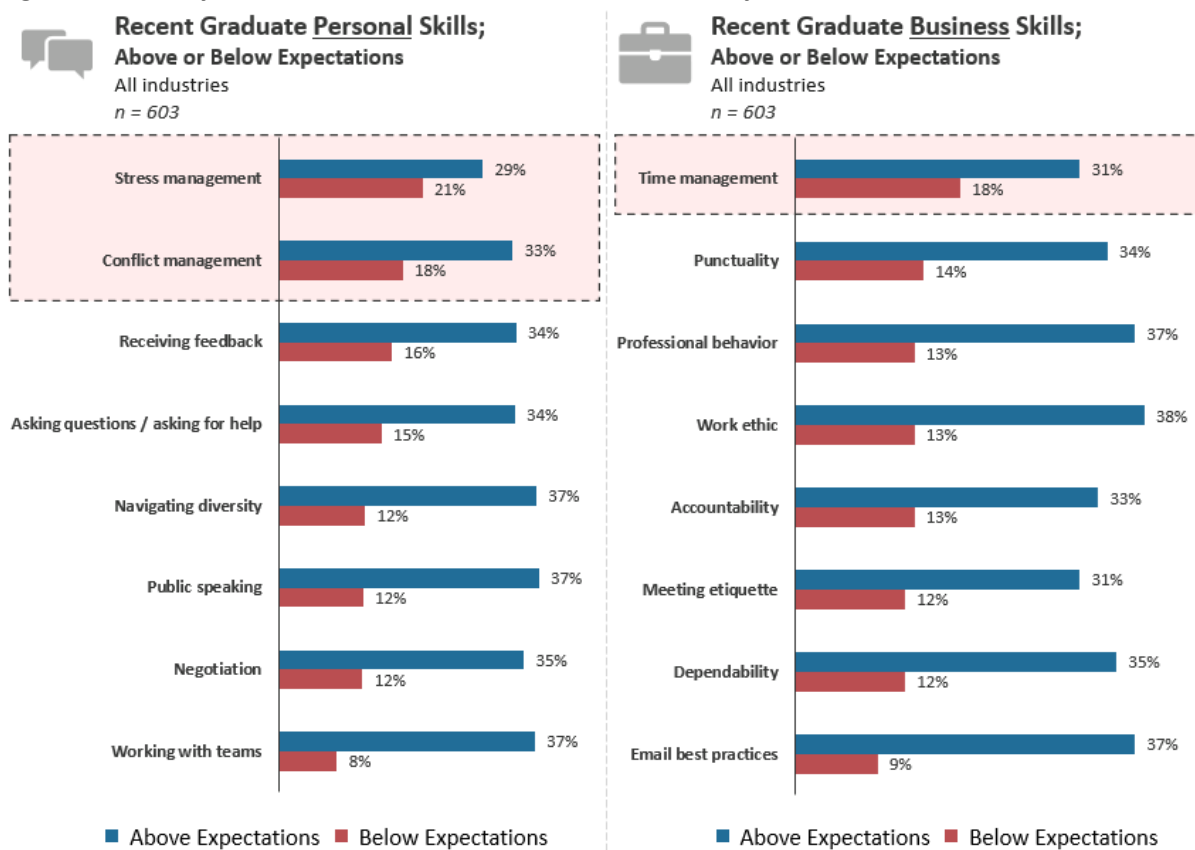
*Industry evaluation of skill quality from 1-5; averaged*





Second, the types of durable skills recent graduates are most deficient in are time management, stress management, and conflict management.

**Figure 4: Industry's Evaluation of Graduates' Durable Skills; By Personal and Business Skills**



### Developing Durable Skills in Graduates

Industry has many ideas on how higher education can be involved in solving these deficiencies. These varied solutions can be summarized simply: engage students in more rigorous and challenging opportunities for personal growth. The approach to accomplish this is not limited to but should include graded opportunities, like increased technical writing assignments, group work, and presentations, as well as systematized ungraded opportunities for improvement, like regular face-to-face feedback from professors and advisors in a manner similar to workplace feedback loops. By addressing the gap in graduates' durable skills with such solutions, higher education can take an active role in addressing this ongoing national deficiency.

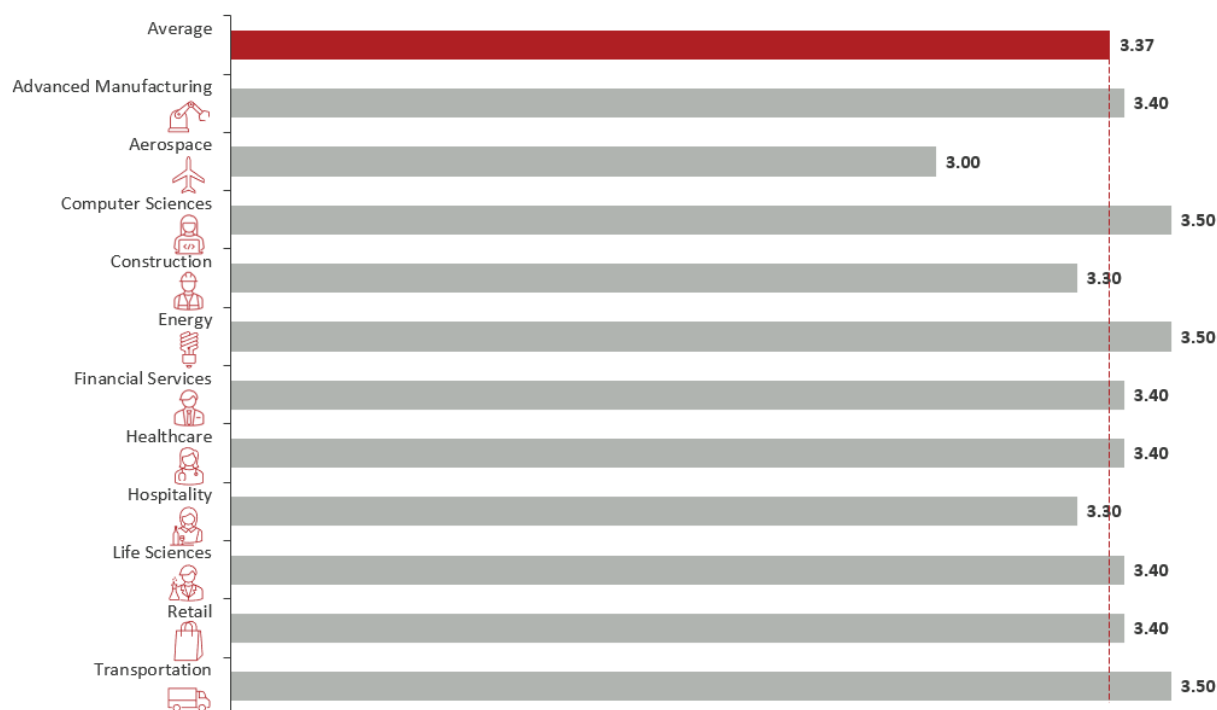
### 3.3.2 Technical Skills

#### Employer Satisfaction with Technical Skills and Industry-Specific Gaps

Technical skills are generally an area of high satisfaction for employers. Recent graduates receive excellent training from Utah's system of higher education and are prepared to do the work in most industries in the state. However, this varies, and a few key industries in the state feel that graduates are not currently trained with the skills to succeed in the technical tasks in their line of work. The most prominent of these is aerospace.

**Figure 5: Industry's Evaluation of Graduates' Technical Skills**

*Industry evaluation of skill quality from 1-5; averaged*



#### Concerns About Outdated Technical Skills

Employers in some industries are also concerned about graduates possessing outdated technical skills. While the majority (79%) believe that the technical skills taught in higher education are up-to-date, one in ten employers feel otherwise. This concern is greater in specific industries, such as life sciences and advanced manufacturing (both at 21%), as well as retail (18%) and aerospace (16%), all of which exceed the overall average.

The challenge stems from the pace of technological advancements and the constraints of the accreditation processes, which make it difficult for higher education to remain at the forefront of evolving technical skill needs. To address this issue, industry has proposed innovative solutions, such as establishing independent credentialing boards staffed by

industry professionals. These boards would ensure that credentials awarded by higher education institutions align closely with current industry demands.

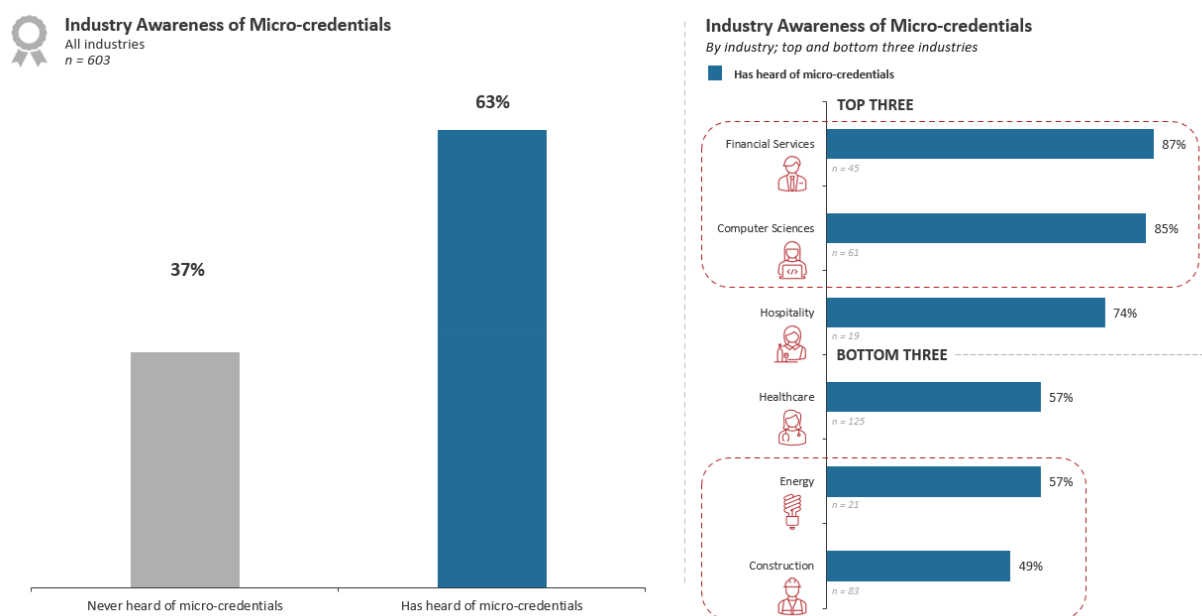
### 3.3.3 Micro-credentials

#### The Role of Micro-Credentials in Bridging Skill Gaps

Micro-credentials are short, focused certifications that validate an individual's knowledge, skills, or competencies in a specific area. Designed to be flexible and targeted, they often address industry-specific needs or emerging trends and can be earned through online courses, workshops, or training programs. In the context of this research, micro-credentials are seen as a way to bridge skill gaps among recent graduates quickly in a cost-effective manner.

Micro-credentials are recognized by a majority of industry professionals, with two-thirds of employers reporting some level of familiarity. However, this overall average is significantly influenced by the construction and healthcare industries, which both represent the largest proportion of survey respondents and the lowest awareness of micro-credentials, (see Figures 6 and 7).

**Figures 6 & 7: Industry Awareness of Micro-credentials; Overall versus by Industry**



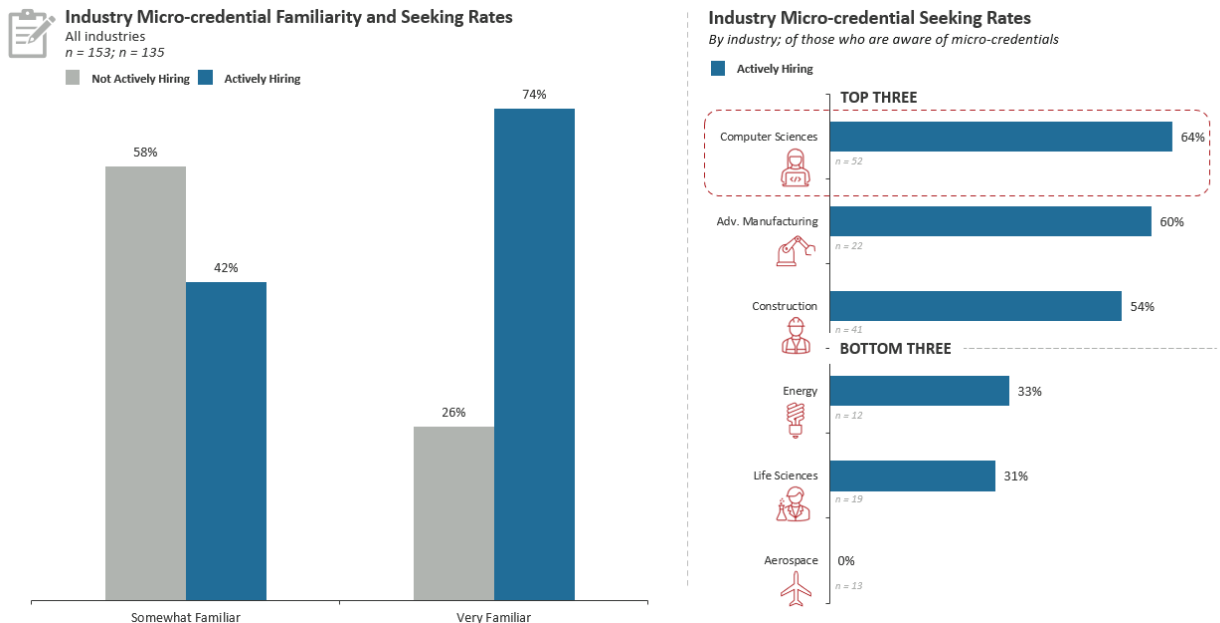
#### Employer Awareness and Demand for Micro-Credentials

Employers that actively hire graduates with micro-credentials often correlate with their individual awareness of these certifications (see Figure 8). For instance, computer science stands out with the highest rate of employers actively seeking graduates with micro-credentials and the second-highest awareness of them (see Figures 7 and 9). However, awareness alone does not fully account for instances where industries do not prioritize

hiring based on micro-credentials. For example, while the financial services industry has the highest awareness of micro-credentials, its rate of actively seeking graduates with them is only average.

Further research is needed to uncover the full range of factors influencing employer demand for micro-credentials. Despite this, it is clear that employers generally view micro-credentials positively, with 65% indicating that these certifications influence hiring decisions. Micro-credentials in technical skills are particularly trusted, with 75% of employers considering them reliable indicators of skill proficiency, while 68% hold similar confidence in micro-credentials for durable skills.

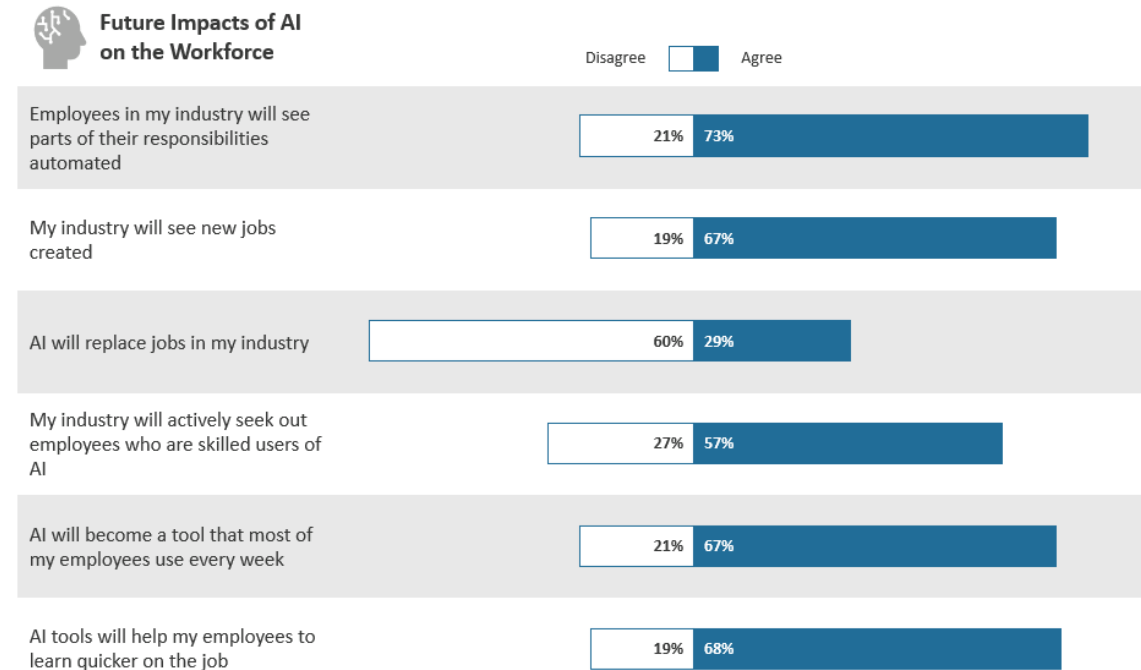
**Figures 8 & 9: Employers Actively Seeking Graduates with Micro-Credentials; Overall and by Industry**



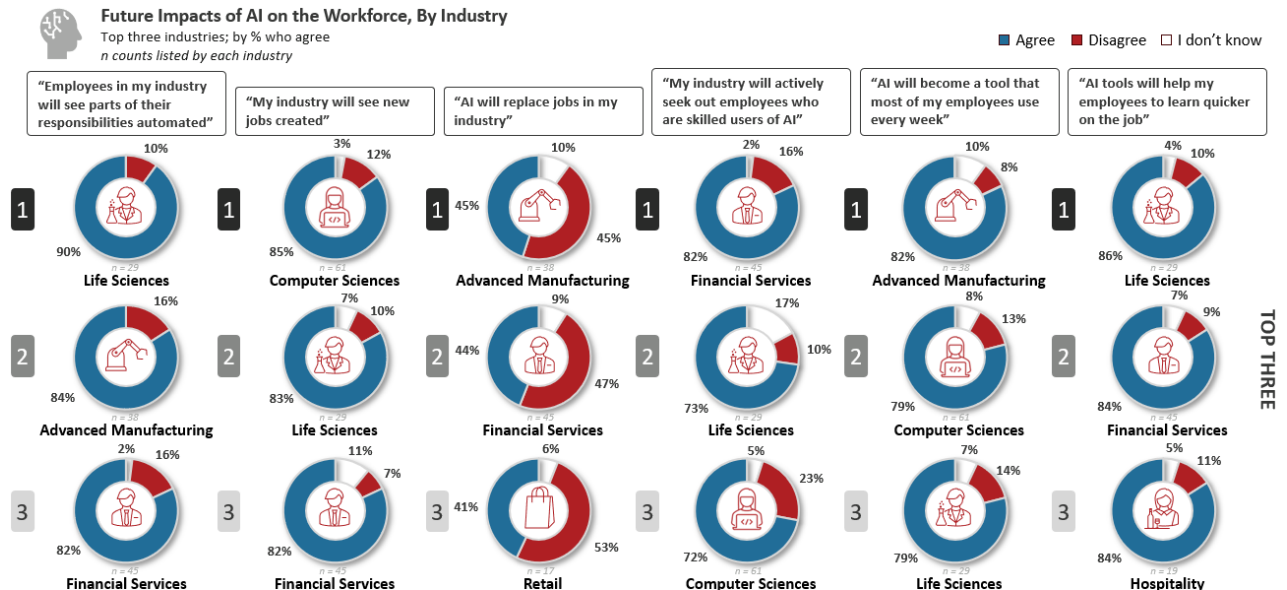
### 3.3.4 AI Impacts

#### The Impact of AI on Workforce Dynamics and Graduate Readiness

Another piece of research central to making sure that higher education is aligned with industry is understanding the current and future disruption caused by new AI tools. In this, employers are generally positive about current and future changes with respect to recent graduates. In general employers forecast high levels of automation of duties caused by AI (73%) but not much loss of jobs due to AI (29%). In fact, most see AI adding jobs to their industry (67%) not replacing them. Due to this, industry is more likely to seek out skilled users of AI (57%) as AI becomes a tool that most employees use every week (67%) and a tool that helps employees to learn quicker on the job (68%). (See Figure 10)

**Figure 10: Current and Future Impacts of AI on the Workforce**

A closer examination of industry-specific changes reveals that the sectors most likely to be significantly impacted by AI include life sciences, advanced manufacturing, computer sciences, and financial services (see Figure 11). These industries anticipate the highest rates of disruption driven by the emergence of new job roles, increased automation, and lowered upskilling requirements.

**Figure 11: Current and Future Impacts of AI on the Workforce, By Industry**

### 3.4 Higher Education-Industry Partnerships

#### Introduction

This section summarizes the survey findings on Utah employers' perceptions of collaboration between industry and higher ed. It underscores the perceived strength of these partnerships, highlights current activities for collaboration, and identifies challenges preventing greater alignment.

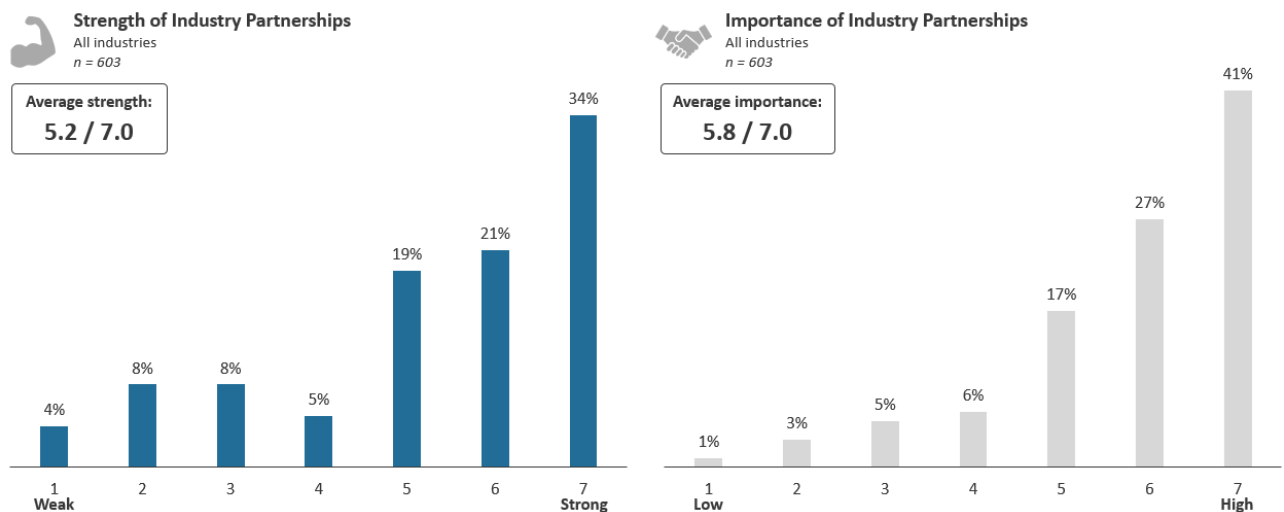
This section outlines employers' evaluations of the strength and importance of industry-higher education partnerships in Utah. Employers provided insights into the perceived effectiveness of these collaborations and their relative importance.

Additionally, the analysis assesses the effectiveness and frequency of specific partnership activities, identifying key areas for improvement and opportunities for expanding these activities.

Lastly, employers share the barriers they encounter in fostering collaboration and partnerships. Common themes and recommendations are summarized to propose actionable solutions for TRU and USHE to strengthen and expand industry-higher ed partnerships.

Findings in this section are reported in aggregate, and not segmented by industry, though a few callouts have been made where appropriate about specific industries. Additionally, findings from the qualitative interviews and free-response sections are summarized and added to give context to quantitative findings. These insights offer a detailed and actionable perspective on how higher education can improve alignment with industry to better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of Utah's workforce.

**Figure 12 & 13: Strength and Importance of Industry Partnerships**



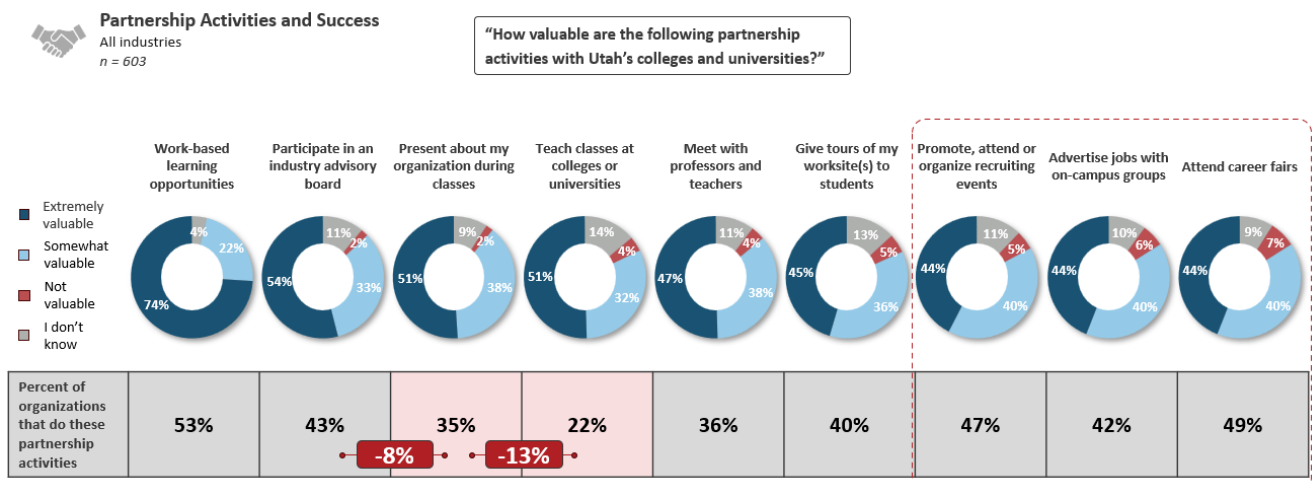
## Workforce Alignment Through Industry Partnerships

Industry partnerships are passable in Utah, with most employers feeling that industry-higher education partnerships are at least “a little strong” with an average score of 5.2 out of 7, (see Figure 12). However, this falls short of employer expectations, as the desired strength of these partnerships averages 5.8 out of 7 (see Figure 13). This gap highlights an opportunity for improvement in collaboration between industry and higher education.

Work-based learning stands out as the most common and impactful form of collaboration, with 74% of employers identifying it as extremely valuable and 53% actively offering such opportunities (see Figure 14). Beyond WBL, industry also places high value on engaging in class presentations and instruction, although these activities are less frequently implemented. There is significant potential to expand industry outreach on campuses through increasing these opportunities because while class presentations and instruction rank among the most valuable after WBL and industry board participation, they are the least commonly practiced.

In contrast, some of the most frequently utilized partnership activities—such as career fairs, campus advertisements, and recruiting events—are perceived as among the least valuable by employers. This misalignment is an opportunity for higher education and industry to reassess and prioritize activities that deliver the greatest mutual benefit.

**Figure 14: Partnership Activities and Success**

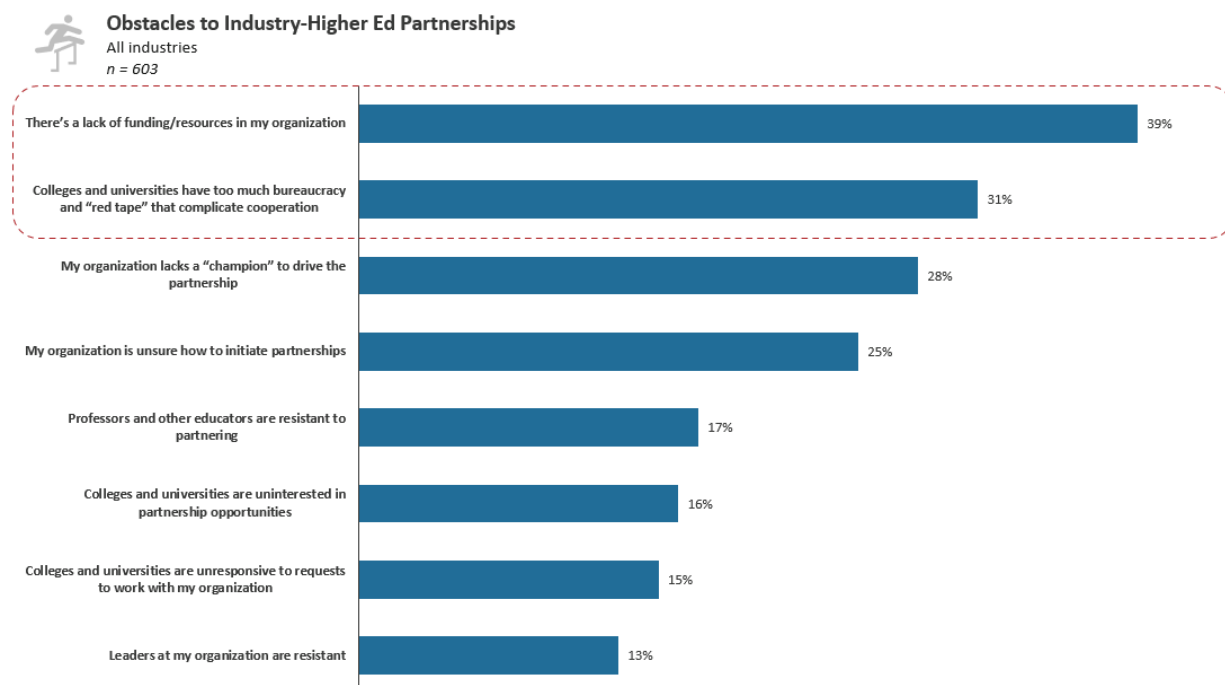


## Overcoming Barriers to Industry-Higher Education Partnerships

Ideally, it would be possible to increase the number of these partnership activities, however barriers exist. Industry recognizes that the largest obstacle to partnering is internal funding and resource constraints, however higher education is at times also perceived as bureaucratic or difficult to cooperate with. As such, higher education can improve their processes to be navigable and simple for industry to engage with.

Encouragingly, a lack of interest or desire from either industry or higher education is rarely cited as a significant obstacle, suggesting a strong foundation of mutual willingness to collaborate (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Common Obstacles to Industry-Higher Education Partnerships**



## 3.5 Work-Based Learning

### Introduction

This section summarizes survey findings on Utah employers' perceptions of recent graduates' readiness for the workforce. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of experiential learning through work-based opportunities, detailing the types of such experiences available and identifying barriers to expanding them.

Work-based learning, as the name suggests, is any opportunity for a student to learn and develop skills through work experiences, whether in actual workplaces or simulated workplace environments. Common examples include internships, apprenticeships, externships and co-ops.

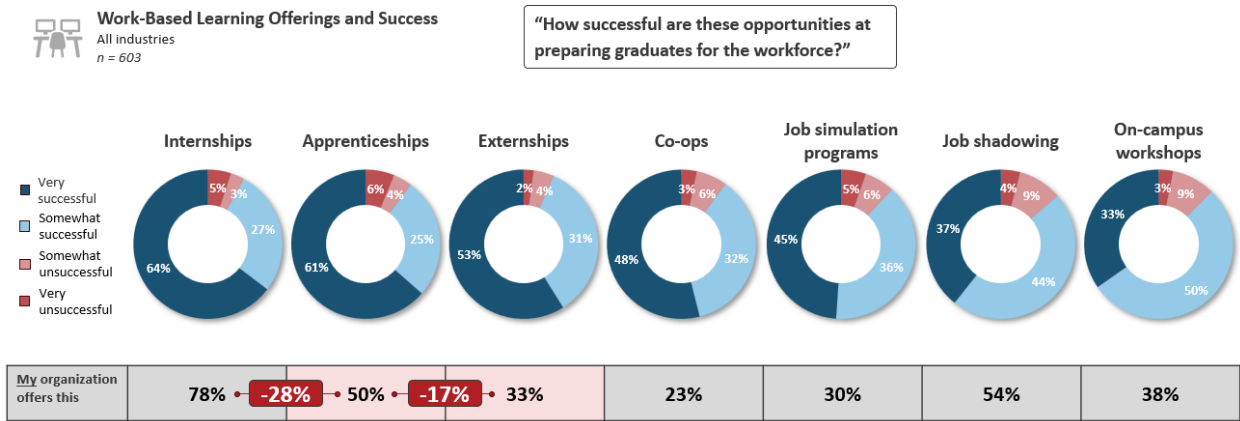
Employers reported on the work-based learning opportunities they offer and the value they place on each. This analysis highlights the prevalence of these opportunities, and their perceived success in preparing graduates as compared to other work-based learning opportunities.

Lastly, employers identified the most significant challenges to providing more work-based learning opportunities. These findings highlight opportunities for USHE and TRU to further improve the collaboration between higher ed and industry in offering work-based learning.



Findings are segmented by the largest industry clusters, healthcare and construction, against all other industries, highlighting areas where certain sectors diverge from broader trends. Additionally, notable quotes from the qualitative interviews and free-response sections are added to give context to quantitative findings. These insights offer a detailed and actionable perspective on how higher education can better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of Utah’s workforce.

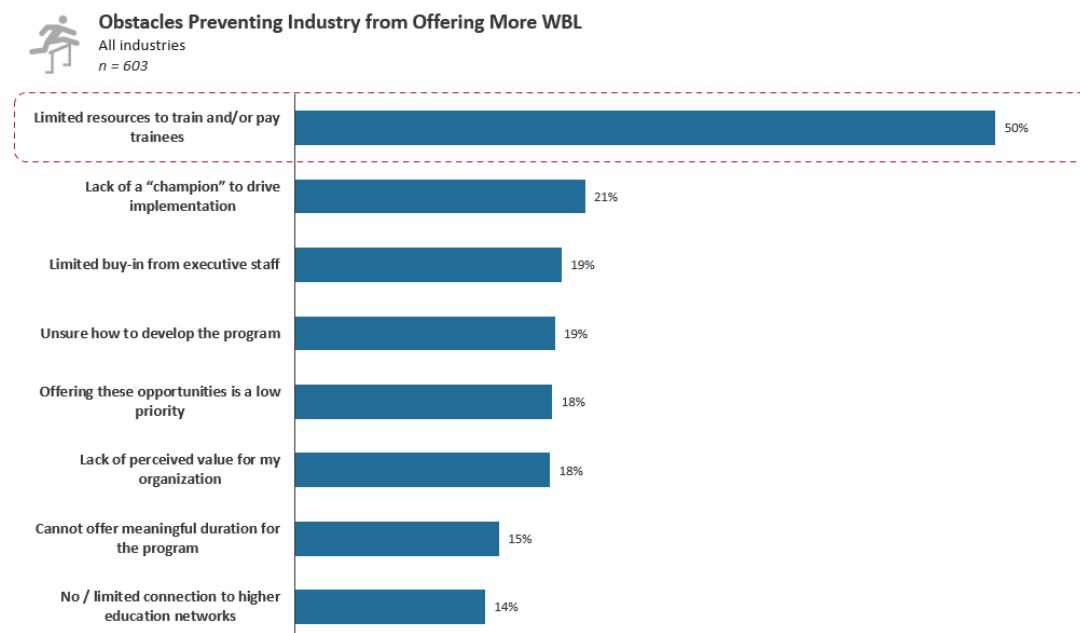
Figure 16: Work-Based Learning Opportunities and Success



Work-Based Learning Opportunities: Prevalence and Success

Internships are the most commonly offered work-based learning (WBL) opportunity, with 78% of employers providing them. They are also regarded as the most effective, with 64% of employers considering internships very successful in preparing graduates for the workforce (see Figure 16). However, this success is not limited to internships; nearly all WBL opportunities are perceived as highly effective by industry.

Despite their effectiveness, only a limited range of WBL activities are widely implemented. Internships and job shadowing are the only opportunities offered by a majority of employers, while other valuable WBL options occur far less frequently. This highlights a significant opportunity to expand access to diverse WBL experiences beyond internships. Given the industry’s broad recognition of the value and success of WBL, increasing the variety of opportunities can further enhance workforce preparedness.

**Figure 17: Obstacles Preventing Industry from Offering More WBL**


### Addressing Barriers to Expanding Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Despite the proven success of work-based learning (WBL) programs, significant barriers prevent many employers from offering these opportunities more broadly. The most common challenge that half of employers experience is a lack of resources to train and/or compensate participants in these programs (see Figure 17). Additionally, many workplaces lack the expertise to design and implement effective WBL initiatives, further limiting their ability to engage.

This presents an opportunity for higher education to play a pivotal role in addressing these barriers. One potential solution, which has garnered interest from industry, is the development of "starter kits" designed to help employers create and manage WBL programs. These kits could include templates, guidelines, and best practices for structuring programs, training participants, and managing resources.

By leveraging their expertise in education and student development, higher education institutions can empower employers to overcome these obstacles, thereby increasing access to valuable WBL opportunities and strengthening workforce readiness.

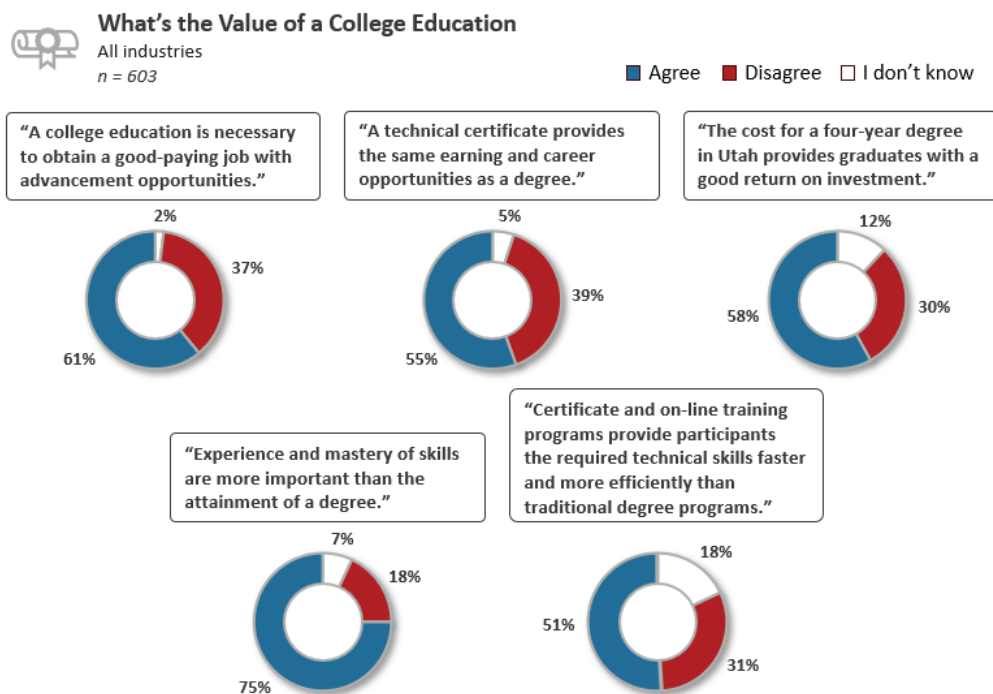
### 3.6 Employer Perception of the Value of Higher Education

This section summarizes survey findings on Utah employers' perceptions of the value of higher education in Utah. Especially how it compares to alternative paths to prepare for the workforce, including experience, technical certificates, and online trainings.

The survey analyzed employer responses to questions about the interplay between education and experience in hiring decisions. Employers rated statements like, "I prefer to hire candidates with job skills over educational credentials," and "A college education is necessary to obtain a good-paying job with advancement opportunities." These responses provide insight into how employers value higher education and practical experience.

Findings are divided into two clusters, healthcare and construction against non-healthcare and construction. This is due to possible industry differences between healthcare and construction industries which make up a disproportionate number of responses.

**Figure 18: Employer Perception of the Value of a College Education**



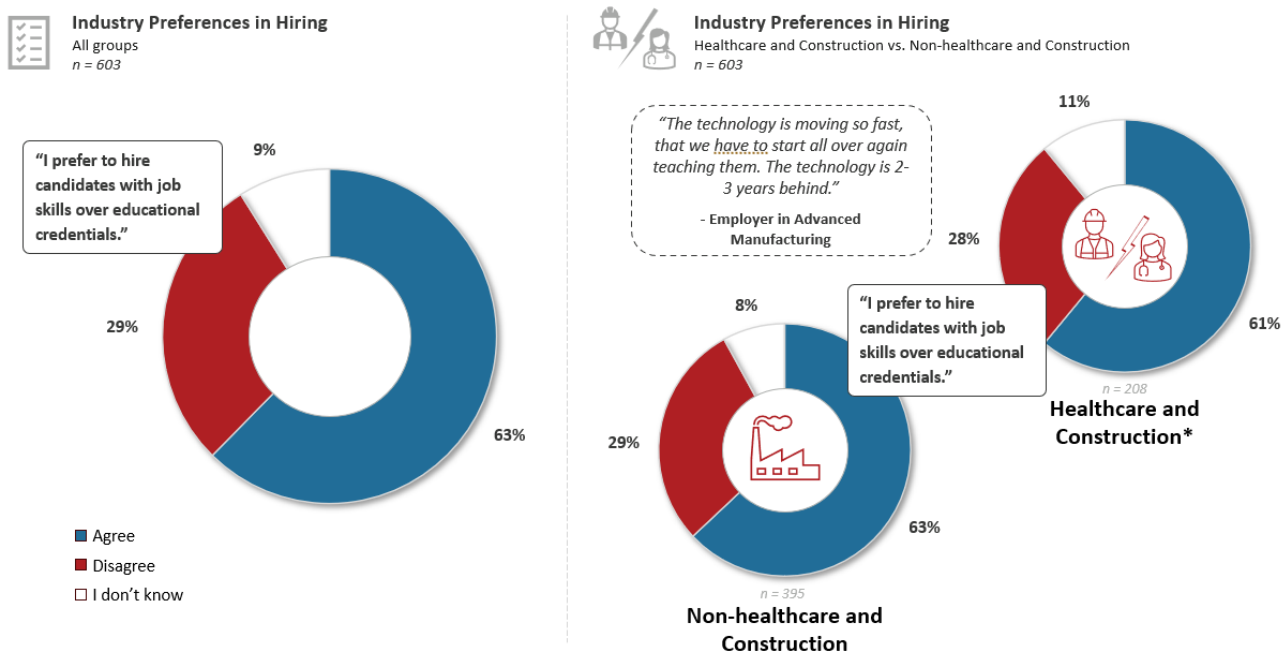
#### Employer Perception of The Value of a College Degree and the Growing Importance of Experience

A college degree in Utah is valuable for future opportunities, and generally seen a good

investment with 61% of industry feeling that a college education is necessary for advancement, and 58% saying that the cost of a four-year degree is worth the investment. However, there is growing industry interest in other learning paths, including hiring for experience (75%), certificates (55%), and online trainings (51%), (see Figure 18).

It is evident that, while college remains a valuable pathway for workforce preparation, its dominance in this role has diminished. Alternative learning pathways are gaining traction, and employers are increasingly prioritizing practical experience, sometimes placing it above higher educational attainment when making hiring decisions, (see Figures 18 and 19).

**Figure 19: Industry Preferences in Hiring**



### The Value of Experience

Across all industries, employers are prioritizing experienced candidates among recent graduates, with 63% indicating a preference for job skills over formal educational credentials. This trend spans diverse fields, from construction and hospitality to computer science. Employers emphasize experience as a response to the rapidly changing skill demands of their industries—a pressing challenge that many face.

To address this need, higher education in Utah should concentrate on equipping students with practical experience during their studies, rather than focusing on teaching the most cutting-edge skills. Doing so will enhance workforce alignment, strengthen the perceived value of higher education, and better meet the expectations of both graduates and employers.

### 3.7 Out-of-State Graduates

#### Introduction

This section examines Utah employers' evaluations of the quality of Utah graduates compared to those from other states. It includes an analysis of the percentage of employers hiring out-of-state graduates across various industries, the factors driving these hiring decisions, and notable successes observed in other states.

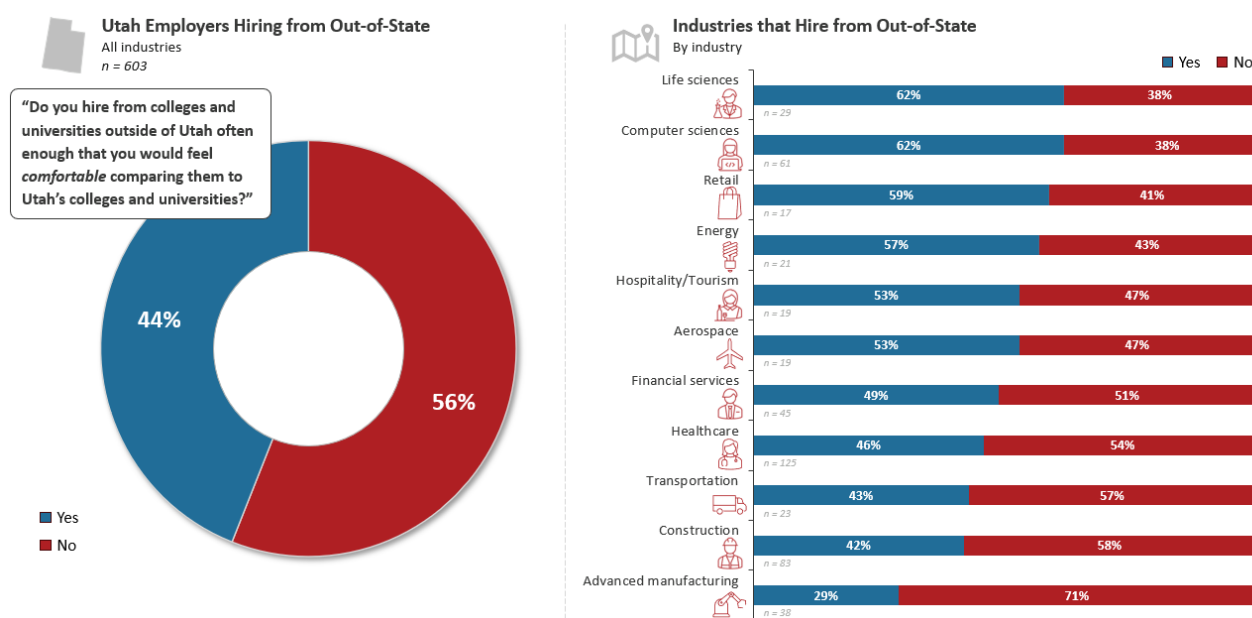
Only employers who indicated they have hired enough out-of-state graduates to make informed comparisons are asked subsequent questions about the quality of these graduates.

Employers' perceptions of the performance of Utah graduates are compared to the performance of out-of-state graduates, complemented by qualitative insights that elaborate on Utah's successes and the successes of other states.

The analysis also highlights the primary reasons employers hire out-of-state graduates, identifying areas where Utah's higher education institutions could improve while acknowledging factors that may be beyond their control.

Finally, the section includes illustrative examples of successful initiatives and strategies from other states, drawn from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey responses.

**Figure 20 & 21: Utah Employers Hiring from Out-of-State; By Industry**



#### Out-of-State Hiring Trends and Perceptions of Utah Graduates

Nearly half of Utah employers report hiring a significant number of graduates from outside the state (see Figure 20). However, this trend varies considerably by industry. Employers in life sciences and computer sciences are the most likely to recruit out-of-state graduates, with 62%

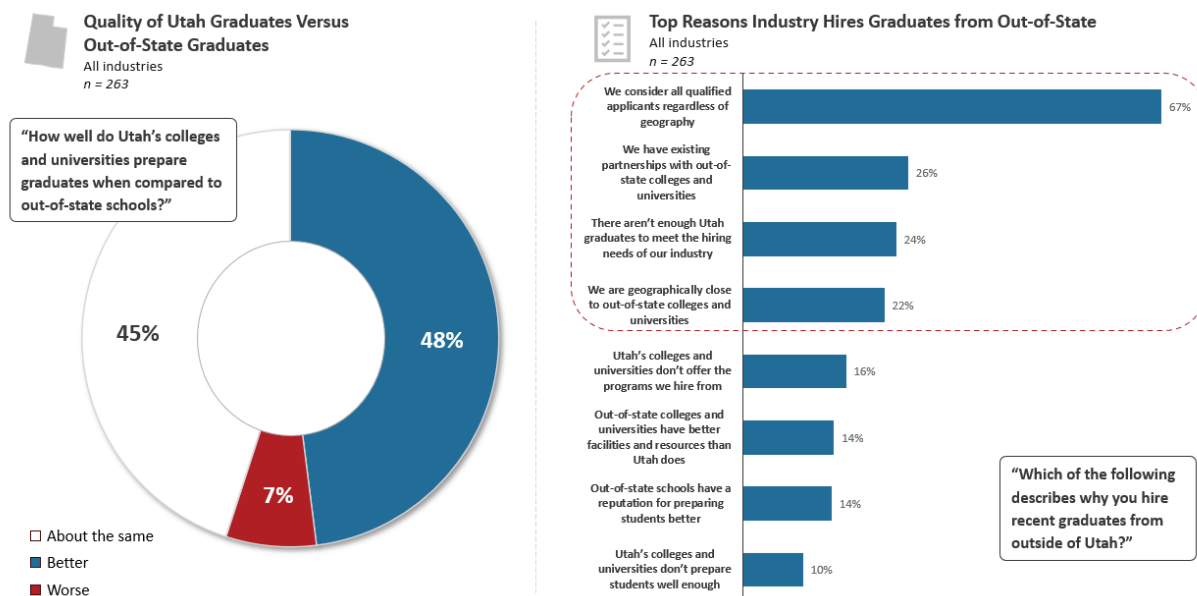
reporting significant hiring from outside Utah. Conversely, Advanced manufacturing employers are the least likely, with only 29% hiring substantial numbers of non-local graduates (see Figure 21).

These trends are not a reflection of poor quality among Utah graduates. In fact, 93% of employers consider Utah graduates to be of equal or superior quality compared to those from other states (see Figure 22). The primary reasons for hiring out-of-state graduates are unrelated to the capabilities of Utah's workforce. The top drivers include:

1. Employers considering graduates from all geographies (67%).
2. Existing relationships with colleges and universities outside Utah (26%).
3. A shortage of Utah graduates to meet specific industry needs (24%).
4. Proximity to colleges and universities outside the state (22%) (see Figure 23).

These findings underscore the strength of Utah's graduates in the workforce and highlight that ongoing efforts to improve workforce alignment are not about addressing major deficiencies. Instead, they are part of a continuous improvement strategy that ensures Utah remains a leader in aligning higher education with industry needs.

**Figures 22 & 23: Quality of Utah Graduates Compared to Out-of-State; Top Reasons Industry Hires from Out-of-State**



### Successes in States Outside Utah

Although Utah is a clear leader in higher education in the United States, employers do feel there are areas where Utah could learn from the successes of other states. A few key examples include: the local connections technical colleges in Idaho have with industry; the independent,

industry driven, credentialing boards in Florida; and the durable skills focused engineering management programs in Colorado.

Idaho's technical colleges excel at producing competitive graduates by maintaining strong connections with local businesses and offering specialized programs tailored to meet regional needs. This approach equips graduates with highly sought-after skills that align with the demands of local industries, making them valuable contributors to their communities. In contrast, Utah's standardized technical college curricula are perceived as somewhat less attuned to workplace requirements. Allowing technical colleges in Utah to prioritize specialized, hands-on learning and align their programs more closely with local economic needs could enhance their effectiveness and provide even greater benefits to businesses relying on qualified technical talent.

Florida has embraced an industry-driven credentialing model that strengthens the connection between education and workforce needs through its independent CareerSource board. Comprised of industry professionals, this board determines which credentials align with high-wage, in-demand jobs and updates the list annually using current industry data. By delegating these decisions to industry experts, education professionals can concentrate on administering credentialing programs. This model promotes greater industry engagement, enables the swift adoption of new credentials, reduces outdated skills, and ensures educational programs stay aligned with the evolving needs of Florida's workforce.

Colorado's engineering programs stand out for their focus on managerial competencies highly valued by industry. During their course of study, students are assessed on durable skills, such as human resource management, and the results are shared with industry partners. This ensures graduates are well-prepared to meet workforce demands. This emphasis on durable skills has been recognized by the engineering and construction industries as a model for how states can better prepare graduates. It also serves as an example for states like Utah on how higher education can develop durable skills in graduates, in conjunction with industry.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1 Next Steps

As the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) and Talent Ready Utah implement recommendations from this report, it is essential to leverage Utah's unique strengths that separate it from the national discourse on higher education. Utah's employers and higher education institutions have consistently demonstrated a strong, collaborative commitment to improving graduate outcomes. This shared dedication, with the growing responsiveness of higher education in Utah, are significant assets that should be leveraged in any future initiatives and strategic plans.

To support this mission, Cicero offers the following actionable "next steps" for Talent Ready Utah and USHE:

**Next Steps:****1. Establish Clear Goals:**

Talent Ready Utah and USHE should define a focused set of goals aligned with the key recommendations included in this report. These goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound to ensure clarity and accountability.

**2. Develop Targeted Initiatives:**

Following the establishment of specific goals, USHE and Talent Ready Utah should identify a concise set of initiatives designed to propel the state to reach these goals.

**3. Plan for Implementation:**

Once initiatives are determined, a detailed implementation plan should be developed.

Talent Ready Utah should lead this effort by outlining:

- a. **Comprehensive Project Plans:** Each initiative should include a clear timeline, responsible entities, actionable steps, and an explanation of how these contribute to the overarching goal.
- b. **Defined Roles and Responsibilities:** Assign specific responsibilities to personnel involved in each initiative to avoid overlap and ambiguity.

**4. Conduct a Mid-Term Progress Assessment:**

After 2–3 years, Talent Ready Utah and USHE should perform a “pulse check” study to evaluate progress. This study should gauge employer perceptions to determine whether, and to what extent, they believe higher education in Utah is actively working to improve its alignment with workforce needs. This study should assess the effectiveness of initiatives as well as identify opportunities to adjust those initiatives for greater impact.

**5. Reassess and Recalibrate:**

A comprehensive “re-baselining” study should be conducted after 4–5 years, employing the same interview and survey methodologies as the initial study. This evaluation should reflect changes in industry dynamics and provide insights into changing trends and outcomes since the original 2024 analysis.

By acting on these recommendations, USHE and Talent Ready Utah will build on the foundation of collaboration and innovation that distinguishes higher education in Utah from the national narrative and ensure ongoing alignment between higher education and industry.