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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

EXAMINING INSTITUTIONAL CAREER PREPARATION: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF  
THEIR WORKPLACE READINESS AND THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN STUDENT  
CAREER DEVELOPMENT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Learning Technologies

by

Molly Gonzales

February, 2017

Kay Davis, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Molly Gonzales

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

This research study is dedicated to several key people whose presence and active involvement in my life have made this experience possible.

My husband, Brandon Gonzales, supported me throughout my journey with his unfailing love, patience, and belief in my abilities to complete this work. He was my source of strength and encouragement when I was tired, and always knew how to make me laugh or put a smile on my face when I needed it.

My parents, Christopher and Betty McCarty have always supported me in every way possible. Without their support or assistance, I would never have been able to begin this program, and I owe everything that I have accomplished thus far to them. They constantly inspire me to achieve more and never give up.

My sweet son, Everett, has been my greatest joy and accomplishment in my life. His arrival during this process gave me a renewed vigor and drive to give everything I have to finish and show him that when you put your mind to it, you can achieve your goals. I look forward to the future and being able to share with him my love of learning and discovering everything that this beautiful life has to offer.

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My son, Everett, began his journey while I was in the middle of mine. Welcoming him into this world and learning how to be his mom brought me immense joy and provided me with the drive to finish the final stages of dissertation so that I could fully focus on my family and the next chapters of our lives.

My parents, Christopher and Betty McCarty are my role models whom I look up to in all things. They taught me how to work hard for everything that I have, and to fight for my goals. It was their love and trust in me that helped support me along the way!

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## ABSTRACT

Existing research suggests a misalignment between the preparation offered by higher education and the workplace readiness skills employers are expecting recent graduates to have mastered. Multiple studies completed on the topic of workplace readiness explored the views of employers, while few gathered the perspectives of students or recent graduates. This embedded mixed methods study invited both undergraduate seniors' and recent graduates' to participate in an on-line survey capturing perceptions of their own workplace readiness and their thoughts regarding the role the university should have in student career development. Current undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni of a private, 4-year non-profit university were surveyed resulting in two samples: 212 undergraduate seniors representing approximately 28% of the senior class and 42 first-year alumni representing approximately 7%. The findings of this study revealed that undergraduates and recent graduates believe the institution should support students' workplace preparation, including technical and soft skill development. While many undergraduate students' and recent graduates' were pleased with their college experience, the majority cited a need for the integration of targeted career development opportunities within their coursework that aligns with current industry expectations. A triangulation of the findings, resulted in 5 conclusions: (a) alumni and seniors share similar views as to the importance of the university's role in supporting students' career development by integrating career-preparation programming within all areas of the student experience, (b) students expect the institution to serve as their talent scout for employers, (c) career preparation programming and academics should not be mutually exclusive of each other, (d) alumni and seniors believe college serves as a training ground for students to become independent adults, and (e) despite having personal experience within the workforce, the views of alumni and seniors were similar regarding workplace readiness. Higher education

leaders are encouraged to communicate with employers for career-related trends in the industry to help inform the integration of career development programming into all aspects of student life. The study results contribute to existing literature by providing insight into the student's perspective on workplace readiness and the university's role in supporting students' career development and transition into the workplace.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Higher education has found itself at a crossroads where the paths forged by institutions and education that once were seamlessly woven together have since divided. Education and learning are in a constant state of evolution as technology, new ideas, and the environmental landscape shape society. Although education has embraced an ever-evolving identity, higher education institutions have been less responsive to these shifting trends (Fischer, 2013). Rather than adapting to the needs of its current clientele, many institutions cling tightly to tradition and avoid change, thus leaving many to question whether the high cost of a college degree is worth the investment (Center for College Affordability and Productivity [CCAP], 2011). Higher education institutions are expected to provide college students with the basic skills necessary to prepare them to be competitive and workforce-ready (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2004). From skills needed to prepare a formal resume and interview well to professionalism and the hard and soft skills sought after by employers, undergraduate college students across the nation are expected to develop these abilities by the time they graduate with their Associate's or Bachelor's degree, and initiate their career search.

Unfortunately, an age-old problem has continued to overshadow each undergraduate graduating class. As recent Associate's or Bachelor's degree holders begin the arduous process of seeking employment many are recognizing that they lack many of the fundamental skills necessary to market themselves as potential employees (Bentley University, 2014a). Additionally, employers are hesitant to hire individuals whose lack of basic workplace readiness skills would result in the need for additional, expensive onboarding, thus leading some to choose instead to leave positions unfilled. With many students and employers pointing fingers and laying blame on higher education institutions for not adequately preparing candidates for the



world of work (Bentley University, 2014a), institutions themselves are having to not only defend their program value, but also the rising cost of their tuition.

Though the cost of attendance continues to skyrocket, students continue to enter colleges and universities with the intention of being able to secure a better job upon graduation, earn more money, and satisfy their career goals (Astin, 1993; Pryor et al., 2012; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1998). Students' identification of expected outcomes of college attendance encourage institutions to take a greater level of accountability for the educational outcomes and concerns of their student body (Baird, 1996; Pryor, et al., 2012). These goals often impose additional pressure on both the students as learners and the institution to prove the efficacy of the services and programs offered to assist students in reaching their goals.

Employers are especially adamant that colleges, universities and their career services offices need to work harder in preparing students for life beyond the classroom (Jaschik, 2014). With the workplace constantly adapting to changes in technology and the needs of consumer, business have in turn looked more to higher education to help students build the professional skills necessary to transition into the world of work efficiently (Fischer, 2013). In 2010, Hart Research Associates (2010) found that "only one in four employers surveyed believed colleges were adequately preparing students to meet the challenges of the current global economy" (p. 1). According to a recent study by the St. Louis Community College: Workforce Solutions Group (2013), 57% of employers shared that, second to general economic conditions, "a shortage of workers with the knowledge or skills" (pp. 1-2) needed to fill current open positions barred their companies from expanding. With many recent graduates lacking the hard and soft skills needed to fill open positions within the labor market, employers are hesitant to hire individuals whose lack of workplace readiness skills would result in the need for additional, expensive onboarding

and adjustment of their current workplace practices (Hais & Winograd, 2014). Unfortunately, as this skills gap continues to grow, recent graduates find themselves struggling to compete with other international candidates within the global labor market.

Historically, the issue of a skills gap between graduates and the workforce is not new as there has always been a small gap between the professional skills undergraduate students graduate with and the hard and soft skills that employers expect their new hires to have mastered. Since the American public education system opened its doors, schools and institutions have been tasked with increasing student knowledge. Early studies by Goldin & Katz (1999) and Kevles (1979) point to changes in industry that have both initiated and exacerbated the skills gap as far back as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With each expansion of industry and advancement of technology, the demand for workers with specific skills has risen, thus charging colleges and universities to reconsider their course offerings and career services programs, such that they could fulfill the need of the workforce by producing a skilled labor force. While industry and technology helped to define the role of career services in the American university, its consistently changing landscape has plagued each generation of graduates who consistently fall short of employers expectations with regards to their level of skill and experience (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Glass, 2007; Hofstadter, Hardy, & Commission on Financing Higher Education, 1952; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

In the early 1900's there was a stark increase in higher education enrollment as the manufacturing industry and field of science rapidly expanded and the demand for knowledgeable workers reached a new high. With colleges and universities rushing to fill the skills gap left by the industry boom, Traditionalists (born before 1946) entered the work environment. Also known as "The Veterans," this group became known as survivors who set the precedent for workplace

ethics and worked diligently in positions created in response to the war effort (Zemke et al., 1999). After the end of World War II, the baby-boomer generation (born 1943-1960) flooded into the work environment as the “world’s largest cohort,” (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007, p. 152) and impacted society, business and the economy. Baby boomers lived and worked during a time of great economic expansion and were known as driven workers always seeking bigger and better opportunities. Unlike their Traditionalist counterparts, many boomers decided to not retire as early due to many defining their lives by their work. Generation Xers (born 1960-1980) came into the working world after living through the economic wars of the 1970s where workers held onto the jobs they had like lifelines (Zemke et al., 1999). With this era sparking the start of the globalization of industry, employers sought to hire highly skilled individuals who could adapt quickly within the changing work environment. The “entry of Generation Y, or Millennials, into the workplace means that for the first time the workforce contains four generations spanning more than 60 years” (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 367).

Current undergraduates and recent graduates would be considered to be millennials (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). The beginning and end dates, which define this demographic group, “vary from beginning dates of 1977-1982 to ending dates of 1994-2003” (Shih & Allen, 2007, p. 90). What sets millennials apart from generations past is the increasing need for America to produce scholarly professionals who aid in keeping America competitive in the global market and who can adapt quickly in a world where technology constantly evolves and changes the needed skill level of the labor force (McNamara, 2009). By the year 2025, “millennials will comprise of more than one in three of adult Americans by 2020 and will make up close to three-quarters of the United States workforce” (Hais & Winograd, 2014, p. 2). According to a recent study by the Educational Testing Service Center for Research on Human Capital and Education

(2015), while “the millennial generation may be the most educated generation in the United State’s recent past, they consistently score below many of their national peers in problem solving, numeracy, and literacy” (p. 4). What these statistics point to is a need for America to readdress not only how the nation competes within a global economy, but also how educational institutions and their career services offices can aid in supporting the future workforce in their professional skill development. In a recent interview regarding the wealth divide, Thomas Piketty highlighted the importance of addressing the skills gap.

Historically, the main equalizing force — both between and within countries — has been the diffusion of knowledge and skills. However, this virtuous process cannot work properly without inclusive educational institutions and continuous investment in skills. This is a major challenge for all countries in the century underway. (Porter, 2015, p. 2)

Without properly equipping these millennial students with the skills and tools necessary to be workplace ready in today’s labor market, these students will be ill prepared to be competitive for jobs on the global level.

In addition, if higher education institutions are unable to demonstrate a positive relationship between the value of earning a college degree and the high cost of attendance, they run the risk of losing prospective students and public support. With the average tuition of higher education institutions having increased 757% in price from 1980-2009 alone, the general public continues to raise questions regarding whether earning a college degree is worth the average \$24,000 dollars in student loan debt with which many students graduate (CCAP, 2011). These results are not just numbers on a page, but represent a historical problem that continues to grow as technology advances and institutions find themselves trying to prepare a generation of students for jobs that have yet to be invented. This makes studies surrounding undergraduate workplace readiness even more important for the purpose of informing higher education on what

steps they can take to help students develop the skills necessary to succeed in the labor market they will be entering.

This study focused on understanding the undergraduate seniors and the most recent graduates' perspectives on workplace readiness, and what factors influence how they perceive this concept. By gaining insight into what influenced student and recent graduate perceptions of what workplace readiness means, higher education can devise methods of using this knowledge to design programs and events, such that students will be further supported in their development of foundational workplace-readiness skills.

### **Background of the Problem**

One of the main goals for any higher education institution relates to providing students with the tools and professional skills needed to find, secure, and transition easily into their future career of choice. However, yearly studies conducted by companies such as Hart Research Associates (2015), and Gallup & Lumina Foundation (2013) point to a misalignment between the preparation programming being offered by institutions and the workplace readiness skills employers are expecting recent graduates to have mastered. What seems to make this skills gap of the millennial generation unique is its pairing with their distinctive culture and approach to life that is considered alien to older generations (Hais & Winograd, 2014).

According to a 2013 study of 1,000 hiring managers, “fewer than two in five managers believed college graduates were well-equipped for a job in their field of study” (Harris Interactive, 2013, p. 3). When compared to the responses given by hiring managers, college students decidedly overestimated their own skills and professional expertise along with their perceived ability to complete specific job duties. The following year, 2014, exposed the crisis even further with the release of Bentley University's *The Prepared U Project*. The study

engaged 3,100 respondents from nine stakeholder groups ranging from upperclassmen in high school to college students to members of the general public, business industry, and higher education. According to the findings, “more than six in ten business leaders claimed that recent college graduates harmed their daily business productivity function due to a lack of preparedness” (Bentley University, 2014a).

With society continuing to advance rapidly with the assistance of technology, now more than ever, employers are seeking employees with a higher level of knowledge and broader range of skills than what was sought after in more recent history. “Lack of interpersonal and communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving, and general business knowledge were cited” (St. Louis Community College: Workforce Solutions Group, 2013, p. 30) as the top shortcomings of recent applicants. Recent graduates’ lack of soft skills is a complaint shared often by employers with career services offices and is echoed in their cry for change amongst higher education. While it may seem that only employers are in an uproar over these labor market issues, millennial undergraduate students and recent graduates are also noticing a change in the expectations of employers and what they themselves need to survive in the current weak job market.

Though the supply of college grads has more than doubled since the 1970s, the demand for college graduates has not risen in the labor world (Capelli, 2015). Instead, the rises in labor needs are for positions that do not require an advanced degree or an Associates or Bachelors. To further exacerbate this concern, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) projected that by 2020, of the new jobs available, that three times as many will require only a high school diploma or less rather than a bachelor’s degree. Despite this alarming fact, students continue to stream into higher education because they equate a college education to a higher paying job and financial

security (Yee, 2012). Unfortunately, this trend is already starting to take form as many recent graduates find themselves underemployed and in positions that do not require their applicants to have a costly degree (Bidwell, 2013). Looking at a study of historical data, there appears to be a “substantial growth from <1 to 15% of occupations employing overeducated workers” (Vedder, Denhart, & Robe, 2013, p. 1). This growing trend of recent graduates taking on positions that are not equal to their degree level is concerning to many Americans who see this disproportion as a sign of the failure of institutions to properly train students for entry into the real world. In 2010 alone, “over 20 million or 48% of working college graduates were underemployed and held positions that did not need a bachelor’s degree” (Vedder et al., 2013, p. 1). While some research suggests that recent graduate attitudes, feelings of entitlement and differing perspective of the workplace have caused the rise of underemployment, some economists point to an oversupply of educated graduates as compared to a lower supply of educated job positions available. As of 2014, this number had only slightly decreased with “44% of recent graduates working in positions not equivalent to that of their degree” (Weissman, 2014, p. 1). Of these underemployed graduates, “9% are working in jobs that pay less than \$25,000 annually” (Weissman, 2014, p. 2). While these workers may find themselves in positions that allow them to earn more than a high school graduate, it often is still not enough to pay off the cost of college (Cappelli, 2015). Further, future projections show that the number of current graduates and current enrollees exceed the number of expected high-skilled jobs that will be available for the future workforce.

When trying to identify the culprit leading to underemployment, many signs point to the lack of quality positions open for recent graduates in addition to the surplus of mediocre-paying positions that end up employing many of these students. As a result, the view towards higher education and its value have shifted over the past 10 years especially with the crisis in the labor

market being under close scrutiny by the general public. According to research, for many millennials, their attitude towards the workplace and the value of their college degree is influenced by feelings of entitlement. Many millennials believe that having a college degree should automatically afford them a position in the industry and organization of their choice. Therefore, when this occurrence does not take place and they find themselves underemployed or taking positions that are not ideal, many blame the education system for not preparing them appropriately or placing them in their desired role (Bentley University, 2014a; Yee, 2012). Many millennials have difficulty in taking ownership for their current or future employment situation. While much of the research criticizes millennials for their unrealistic expectations and demands, others perceive the situation differently. During an interview in 2013, CEO Dan Schwabel gave the following perspective on why millennials are perceived as entitled, and why this tag may be misplaced:

Millennials are facing a really tough economy now, and they are suffering from an unemployment rate of over 16%... They realize that internships and degrees don't turn into jobs, so they see freelancing as a path to success... Millennials may be perceived as entitled, but, really, they have to have an entrepreneurial mindset and manage their career differently in order to make it. (Levin-Epstein, 2013, para. 9)

While this research study did not focus on the role of entitlement in regards to students' perceptions of their own workplace readiness and the role they feel the university should play in student career development, it is important to keep in mind that these feelings of entitlement could have directly influenced the students' perspectives of their current situation.

Originally, the purpose of continuing one's education beyond high school was to obtain credentialing or specific training to enter the workforce, along with learning how to think, expand one's knowledge, and acquire essential life skills needed to be successful in today's world (Bentley University, 2014a ; Yee, 2012). Today, higher education is perceived by the



world as an even greater necessity to being successful in the labor market, especially with a reduction in the number of well-paying jobs and college degrees serving as the key for many to securing gainful employment (Mullen, 2010; Yee, 2012).

While the cost of higher education continues to increase and the economic benefits become further questionable, higher education will be forced to determine their stance on the issue. For many in higher education, the attitude remains that “higher education is meant to educate broadly, not train narrowly” (Fischer, 2013, p. 5). Instead, they see businesses as asking too much and refusing to take responsibility for the training of their own employees. One could say that the skills gap is not the only gap present, but one also exists between what skills higher education and employers believe students should graduate with. With the statistics pointing to a need for change, the call for action has been heard across the nation and garnered the attention of the federal government. In response to the continued negative media and research regarding the state of affairs for millennials, the President and federal government have decided that higher education should be more strictly monitored to determine their effectiveness. More strict regulations regarding university reporting of student outcomes will be used as an intervention to help determine which institutions are not preparing students for gainful employment. If institutions are unable to represent positive outcomes for their student body, they will run the risk of losing their accreditation (Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, in order for institutions to effectively assist students in the development of workplace readiness skills, administrators of career services at the collegiate level must understand what influences student views of what makes one workplace-ready, such that this knowledge can be utilized to design and implement new programs to support student acquisition and development of these necessary skills.

## **Problem Statement**

Over the past 10 years, increasingly negative research results and media have exposed the growing skills gap between the nation's recent graduates and the workforce. With the landscape of the workforce constantly changing, the demand for skilled workers continues to increase as technological advances and breakthroughs in industry result in the creation of positions that need qualified candidates. Research shows that employers are greatly discouraged and frustrated by the lack of workplace readiness skills that millennial students are graduating with from colleges and universities. Though employers are already pointing fingers in blame, recent millennial alums are also venting their frustration and disappointment towards their university and career services regarding the lack of preparation and assistance in their development as professionals. With many recent alums finding themselves underemployed and lacking by employer standards, they have begun to question the value of their college degree. Much of the current research focuses on employers perceptions of workplace readiness and what constitutes a highly qualified candidate (Bentley University, 2014a; Bentley University, 2014b; Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2013; Harris Interactive, 2013) while there is limited research that focuses on the undergraduate and recent graduate's perceptions of workplace readiness and the role that institutions should play in the preparation of students for life outside of college.

## **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this embedded mixed methods study was to explore undergraduate and recent graduate's understanding of what it means to be workplace ready and how their experience in a higher education institution did or did not assist them in developing these necessary skills. This study also sought to understand how recent graduates perceived their degree and its return on their investment. The results of this type of study can be used by

institutions to inform decisions regarding the need for additional programming or new learning opportunities which can reach students on a greater level to help develop them as professionals and assist them in building their professional skill set.

### **Research Questions**

Central guiding research question:

- What are undergraduate students' and recent graduates' perceptions of the quality of career preparation provided by their institution?

Sub questions:

1. What skills do undergraduate seniors and recent graduates define as being workplace-readiness skills?
2. What skills do undergraduate seniors and recent graduates perceive as being most important to secure a degree-appropriate job?
3. What university-offered resources would assist undergraduate students in developing workplace-readiness skills that are not currently offered?
4. What activities do students perceive as most valuable in preparing them for the world of work?

### **Research Design**

The study utilized an embedded mixed methods design, with the intent of gaining a rich understanding of students' perceptions of workplace readiness and the career preparation provided by their institutions. Creswell (2009) describes embedded mixed methods as a design that combines the use of either quantitative or qualitative data within a greater design where "the data sources play a supporting role in the overall design" (p. 16). The target populations for this study were current undergraduate seniors and the most recent graduating class of a private, non-

profit institution in California. Data was gathered through online surveys capturing both quantitative and qualitative data and designed specifically for the targeted group. The key difference in the recent graduates' survey involved the language used within the survey which encouraged alumni participants to reflect back upon their time as students to answer the survey items.

The researcher is a staff member of the targeted private, non-profit institution in California. To support subject anonymity and ensure confidentiality of the students and alumni participating, the online surveys were created and administered through Qualtrics. Within this survey administration software, responses were stripped of any identifying information before being seen by the researcher. The research followed the rules as set forth by the Pepperdine University Institutional Review Board.

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

This study assumed that the population of undergraduate seniors from the non-profit higher education institution targeted was representative of other graduating undergraduates from other private institutions. Additionally, the population of first-year alum from the non-profit higher education institution was representative of other first-year alum from other private institutions. Second, the study assumed that once graduates leave the collegial environment, their understanding of workplace readiness changes upon gaining experience in the professional world. Third, it was assumed that career development and workplace readiness skills were not a part of the current academic curriculum. Fourth, it was assumed that current undergraduate students and recent graduates have a basic understanding of workplace readiness, however are not educated on what workplace readiness skills employers are looking for within the various industries or how skills can be developed through experience. Fifth, the research assumed that

current students' and recent graduates' attitudes towards workplace readiness and the role they feel the university should play in career development could be influenced by feelings of entitlement. This research study focused on participants' perceptions and experiences, without diving deeper into how their feelings of entitlement might have influenced their personal career development. Lastly, the study assumed that the limited student knowledge of workplace readiness leads to a miscommunication of the roles that the student themselves and institution play in the student's career development. Whatever their current understanding of workplace readiness was, participants received a working definition before beginning the survey process.

This study was limited to a single, non-profit private higher education institution located in California. This institution was selected as it has a student body representative of those preparing to enter the workforce. The distribution of majors provided a cross-section of data that highlighted the different preparation methods used for students majoring in various industries. With each industry drawn towards candidates with a specific skill set, capturing these undergraduate seniors' and recent graduates' perceptions provided insight into potential gaps in workplace readiness preparation across majors and industries. In addition, research shows that while the skills gap affects universities across the company, that private institutions typically show that their graduates have greater success in securing gainful employment. By seeking to understand where strengths and weaknesses in workplace preparation are occurring, these results can be shared with similar institutions to inform decisions regarding future academic and career services programming. Finally, this study was conducted with the intention of understanding student perceptions of workplace readiness. With current research already having explored the employer and career services perspective, this study limited its collection of data to

undergraduate senior students and first-year alumni of the targeted institution to understand what can be done to bridge the skills gap and properly prepare students for the working world.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The main underlying framework for this study focused on workplace readiness. Workplace readiness refers to “the possession of the foundational skills needed to be minimally qualified for a specific occupation or role” (ACT, 2013, p. 3; Hais & Winograd, 2014; United States Department of Education, 2015). The topic of workplace readiness has garnered much attention over the past 15 years as negative reports have pointed to millennials’ struggle to secure gainful employment upon graduation, due to a lack of workplace readiness skills. With employers becoming increasingly disappointed with the quality of candidates arriving fresh from the university, many have voiced their concern that institutions are not supporting their students to be competitive in the local and global labor markets. Literature focused on the employers perspectives as to what makes a college graduate workplace ready were explored as well as any existing studies focused on defining workplace readiness, desired skills and competencies, and student perceptions of their value.

For many millennial recent graduates, despite having a college degree, their lack of workplace readiness skills have resulted in their underemployment. Glyde (1977) describes underemployment as “a set of conditions where the number of hours worked, compensation, and skills required to fill a position are incompatible with the skill level of the employee” (p. 246). Not only does underemployment affect all academic disciplines, but is also affects the ability for students to pay back the debt they have accrued from earning their degree. Literature focused on defining underemployment and its implications for graduates was studied as its prevalence

amongst millennials has aided in directing the Federal Government and public interest to take a greater interest in higher education practices.

Many administrators believe that the responsibility of preparing the future work force has been placed into the hands of higher education without their consent (Fischer, 2013). Despite this view, the Federal Government has determined that institutions will be held responsible for the employment outcomes of their student body, citing that this type of reporting will police those institutions that profit while their students struggle to find gainful employment. According to the Federal Government, a student is gainfully employed if they are employed in a position whose salary enables them to pay back the full amount of their loans per a set prior agreement (DOE Debt Measures Rule, 2012). Further institutionally provided career-specific programs are “considered to lead to gainful employment if the average graduates’ estimated annual loan payment does not exceed 20% of their discretionary income or 8% of their total earnings” (Department of Education, 2014, para. 3). The deeper exploration of gainful employment regulations and supported literature highlighted future decisions that higher education institutions will need to make regarding the workplace preparation of their students.

The institution of gainful employment regulations, current media, employers, and recent graduates have charged higher education with the need for change, citing the skills gap between recent graduates and the workplace as being a result of poor preparation provided by the university and departments affiliated with career services. Thus, the function and role of career services within higher education environments was investigated as it provides an important foundation for the proposed study. The literature provided within the next chapter serves as the framework upon which the study was both designed and built.

## Definitions and Key Terms

- *Career Services in Higher Education*: A department of university professionals that provide services to students that help them to “choose and attain personally rewarding careers, and also help employers develop effective college relations programs which contribute to effective candidate selections for their organizations” (NACE, 2015b, para. 1). In the targeted institution, there is a single Career Services department with 7 employees accountable for providing career services and career-related events to all undergraduates and alumni of the target institution’s undergraduate campus.
- *Workplace Readiness*: Often interchanged with “career readiness,” workplace readiness describes “the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace” (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2015a). For this study, workplace readiness was self-assessed by undergraduate graduating seniors and first-year alumni of the target institution using an online survey process.
- *Workplace Readiness Skills*: “Workplace readiness skills include both foundational cognitive skills such as reading for information, applied mathematics, locating information, problem solving, and critical thinking and non-cognitive skills, or soft skills, which are defined as personal characteristics and behavioral skills that enhance an individual’s interactions, job performance, and career prospects such as adaptability, integrity, cooperation, and workplace discipline” (ACT, 2013, p. 3). Perceptions of workplace readiness skills were gathered from the self-assessment responses of undergraduate graduating seniors and first-year alumni of the target institution using an



online survey process. Responses were limited to those of graduating seniors and first-year alumni, and did not include the perspective of employers of Career Services staff.

- *Gainful employment*: “Secure employment within the field for which a students’ program prepared them and must earn salaries in those positions which enable them to pay off their loans per prior agreement” (DOE Debt Measures Rule, 2012, p. 34409). Gainful employment of first-year alumni was determined by alums self-assessment of salary and ability to pay off student loans per prior agreement.
- *Underemployment*: An individual is consider underemployed if they meet any of the following criteria: (a) they possess more formal education than their current job requires, (b) they are involuntarily employed in a different field from that in which they received their formal education, (c) they possess higher-level skills than the job requires, (d) they are involuntarily engaged in part-time, temporary or intermittent employment, and (e) they are earning 20 per cent less than the average earnings of their graduating cohort in the same major or occupation track. (Feldman, 1996, p. 388)

Underemployment was determined through the self-reporting of first-year alum of the targeted institution. Alum self-reported the level of degree required to hold their current professional role.

- *Millennial*: Also known as “Generation Y, millennial is the name given to the generation of individuals born between 1982 and 2003” (Hais & Winograd, 2014, p. 2). For the purposes of this study, the online survey was only delivered to millennials at the target institution who were graduating seniors or first-year alum.
- *Skills gap*: A term used to describe the “difference he difference between the skills needed for a job versus those skills possessed by a prospective worker” (ACT, 2011, p. 2). Perceptions of having a skills gap were determined by asking first-year alum of their experience upon acquiring their first professional position. Participants then self-reported

whether they felt adequately skilled for the position, if they had to receive specialized training, what skills were they lacking (if applicable), and how this skills gap was addressed (if applicable). Graduating seniors were asked to self-report their perceptions of their skill level in comparison with the current workforce, strengths, and weaknesses.

### **Significance of the Study**

“Millennials will comprise more than one in three of adult Americans by 2020, and will make up as much as 75% of the United States workforce by 2025” (Hais & Winograd, 2014, p. 2). With the skills gap continuing to grow and garner attention by the public and government, higher education has become caught in the crossfire and tasked with bridging this gap (ACT, 2011). Higher education enrollment continues to increase each year as students flood institutions with the intent of gaining knowledge and securing employment at the level of their degree (Vedder et. al, 2013; Yee, 2012). With statistics showing college graduates fairing better financially than non-degree holders, many quickly finance their degree with the assumed idea that they will be able to pay it back quickly after college. Unfortunately for many, this has not been the case. Since the great recession of 2008, the underemployment rate of the United States has remained consistently high – maintaining around 10% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010; Miller & McKee, 2009). The impact of the recession was not biased towards any individual’s education level, but instead affected all regardless of degree earned. Not only were thousands of jobs cut in the process, but also the number of “good jobs” left available was limited. As a result of the weakened economy and labor market, many recent college graduates have found themselves in professional positions that are not equivalent to the degree they earned.

For many recent graduates, embarking on the transition from formal education to the workplace can be extremely daunting. Across the literature over the past ten years, common

themes of recent graduates feeling unprepared and experiencing anxiety or tension upon seeking employment were noted. New degree holders often describe feeling “that something is missing or has been missed” (Olson, 2014, p. 74) as they shift from college to the workplace. A study of chemical engineers after graduation found them to be “adequately, if not well, prepared to face the challenges of work in industry” (Martin, Matham, Case & Fraser, 2005, p. 178). Yet, despite having confidence in their preparation, many also expressed feelings of being “thrown into the deep end” in their new roles and ill-equipped to be successful. In a study conducted by Farner and Brown (2008), student felt ready for the work world, but that confidence ebbed for those closer to graduation as compared to the responses of lower division students.

Even with feelings of anxiety or concern towards entering into a new role, recent graduates exude the belief that they are ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. Unfortunately, employers do not express this same confidence in their new hires, and feel that despite holding a degree, that many of these individuals are ill-prepared for the workplace setting (Bentley University, 2014a; Farner & Brown, 2008; McLester & McIntire, 2006; Olson, 2014). This disconnect between what the employer views and recent graduates see in themselves has led industry leaders to question what higher education is doing to support students in this transition.

Of the current research and data that is available, the researcher found few studies that focused solely on student’s perception of workplace-readiness and how their institution has prepared them to enter into the future workplace. Most data focuses on the perceptions of recruiters and businessman, and the workplace readiness skills they believe students are lacking. This study has the potential to inform institutions of their students’ mindsets and feelings regarding how well they have prepared their students for life outside of college. In addition, understanding students’ and recent graduates’ perceptions towards workplace readiness and the

skill necessary to be successful will allow administrators to identify gaps in preparation methods and skill development. This information can guide future programming and help to inform future decisions of how the institution should move forward to address the skills gap of their students.

### **Chapter Summary**

With the recent governmental stipulations set forth by the President to address the growing skills gap of recent graduates, higher education administrators now more than ever need a plan to address the trouble facing their recent graduates. In order to help more institutions understand the student mindset regarding workplace readiness, the student body and recent graduate perception regarding how their institution prepared them for the workplace must be understood and addressed. The review of literature presented in the next chapter describes current research and knowledge about workplace readiness including the responsibility of career services in higher education, gainful employment regulations, the crisis of underemployment, corporate expectations for workplace readiness, and the workplace readiness skills that graduates are expected to have when they enter the world of work. Additional research on perception of higher education regarding the training of students will also be reviewed to better understand the viewpoints of institutions and how this might affect the reaction of higher education towards these new expected learning outcomes.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

“In the years since the Great Recession, the American economy has struggled to regain its economic pace, and more policymakers are turning to education to help meet the high demands of a skilled workforce” (Hultin, 2014, p. 1). With technology rapidly advancing, the field of education and learning are constantly evolving in an attempt to meet the demand of an ever-changing society. While educational institutions have attempted to keep up with the changing landscape of the world, many are also clinging tightly to tradition in an attempt to avoid change and separate themselves from being held responsible for what happens to their students beyond graduation. Yet, as research on the underemployment of recent graduates continues to report a considerable skills gap and lack of preparedness (Bentley University, 2014a), all eyes and attention are being directed towards higher education and understanding the role an institution plays in preparing students for life as a working professional (Fischer, 2013). This review of the available literature focuses on exploring how workplace readiness is defined and in turn what the corporate expectations are regarding student workplace readiness skills. With many of the nation’s recent graduates plagued with unemployment as a result of their lack of workplace readiness, recent literature will be studied that highlight how we define underemployment and how its continued increase has resulted in the release of gainful employment regulations. These regulations along with the history of career services roles within higher education will be explored to provide a foundation of knowledge for this study in an attempt to better understand how these concepts should fit within the realm of higher education.

### Workplace Readiness

Over the past decade, increasing exposure has been given to the subject of workplace readiness and how the field of education has fared in supporting graduates in their preparation for the world of work. With the landscape of the work environment changing, identifying the

skills that new employees need to transition successfully in the modern workplace has become increasingly important. The issue of workplace readiness is not a new phenomenon, and there have been several notable projects that have focused on defining workplace readiness, identifying key skills and supporting future employees' development of these skills. (ACT, 2015; Bentley University, 2014b; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; NACE, 2014, 2015b). Within each workforce sector, there are industry-specific technical skills that are expected of employees within that field. What sets workplace readiness skills apart from industry-specific, technical skills is transferability. Workplace readiness describes an individual's possession of key skills needed to meet the minimum qualifications for a specific job or position (ACT, 2015; Hais & Winograd, 2014; United States Department of Education, 2015). These key workplace readiness competencies are transferable across all industries and necessary for success in the ever-evolving workplace.

While workplace readiness is not a new concept, key projects conducted by the National Academy of Science (1984), Committee for Economic Development (1985), and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report (1990) were instrumental in defining and advocating for the need of these skills within the labor force (Martin, 2009). The National Academy of Sciences enlisted a diverse study panel of representatives from across education, public/private sector and the government. The panel was tasked with identifying the non-technical "employability skills" one needs to be successful in any type of employment. Ten core competencies were cited by the study panel as being the most important including: social and economic studies, oral communication, computation, science and technology, reading, writing, reasoning and problem solving, interpersonal skills, and personal work habits and attitudes (National Academy of Science, 1984). A year later, the Committee for Economic

Development released a report called, *Investing in our Children*, which included an employer survey that Levin (1985) states, identified ten groups of professional traits including working well with others, communication, problem solving, and decision making. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report of the year 1990, was developed for the purposes of understanding what fundamental skills were needed to find success in the working world. In addition to finding that college graduates were lacking the skills necessary to compete within the current workplace (U.S. Department of Labor – Employment and Training Administration, 1990), the report released recommendations for entities involved in the development of a high-performance, high-skill workforce. These initial studies laid the foundation for more current research regarding the professional preparation of students and the competencies of workplace readiness employers expect for students to have mastered.

In 2006, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management worked together to compile a report focused on understanding and describing the skills applicants must have to be considered strong candidates for employment positions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The report *Are they really ready to work?* (2006), builds upon the existing research that job candidates would need a range of skills to be successful within the modern workforce and further categorized the discussed skills into two distinct groups: basic knowledge/skills and applied skills (see Figure 1).

Basic Knowledge /Skills	Applied Skills
English Language (spoken)	Critical Thinking/Problem Solving
Reading Comprehension (in English)	Oral Communications
Writing in English (grammar, spelling, etc.)	Written Communications
Mathematics	Teamwork/Collaboration
Science	Diversity
Government/Economics	Information Technology Application
Humanities/Arts	Leadership
Foreign Languages	Creativity/Innovation
History/Geography	Lifelong Learning/Self Direction
	Professionalism/Work Ethic
	Ethics/Social Responsibility

<sup>1</sup> Applied skills refer to those skills that enable new entrants to use the basic knowledge acquired in school to perform in the workplace.

*Figure 1.* Employers categorization of basic knowledge versus applied workplace readiness skills. From *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, (p. 9), by J. Casner-Lotto & L. Barrington. Copyright 2006 by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and The Society for Human Resource Management. Reprinted with permission.

Of these two categories, employers stressed that applied skills including critical thinking and teamwork/collaboration were very important to success at work (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). The National Center on Education and the Economy (2007) further supported the report by citing that while strong candidates should have a solid academic background, it is vital that they “be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, analysis and synthesis, working with others and being able to apply one’s skills accordingly” (p. 8). Within this knowledge driven economy where information rapidly changes, “workers must be both immediately and sustainably employable” (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 32). Further, workers must maintain and build the skills and knowledge specific to their current industry as well as “possess generic skills, dispositions and attributes that are transferable to many occupational situations and areas” (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 32).



Despite numerous studies and reports across the literature citing the need for workplace readiness skills within higher education, the terminology and description of the most vital skills needing to be taught varied amongst reports. “These transferable skills, essential for employability at some level for most” (Kearns, 2001, p. 2) are also known as “key competencies, transferable skills, or core skills” (Mayer, 1992, p. 7). In 2015, in an effort to promote consistency amongst higher education and professional organizations, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) established a task force of members including representatives from corporate America and higher education institutions to lead an initiative focused on supporting the employment process for recent college graduates. Through the task force, all stakeholders worked together to devise seven core competencies whose mastery would result in a workplace ready college graduate. The core competencies identified would serve as the foundation on which all higher education partners of NACE would establish their career services offices and associated programming. The task force created by NACE to develop the seven career-readiness competencies is one of the first successful partnerships of higher education and the business industry regarding workplace readiness of recent graduates. According to the Prepared U Project, of those surveyed, “87% believe that businesses need to work with higher education to improve career services” (Bentley University, 2014a, p. 18). By working together to create a unified set of strategies for improving the preparation of college students for the workplace, more lines of communication have opened up between these two groups that boundaries had previously divided. The “definition and competencies provide for development of strategies and tactics that will close the gap between higher education and the world of work” (NACE, 2015a, p. 2).

The first competency is *critical thinking and problem solving*. NACE defines this as the ability to use sound reasoning in making decisions to overcome problems. A strong critical thinker is one that can gather the information necessary to make an interpretation. Inventiveness, creativity, and originality are highly valued and considered important aspects of the competency. Creativity is further seen as the inspiration for “innovative thinking that will develop tomorrow’s new products” (Wegner, 2010, p. 22). According to Schramm, Phil, Williams, Green, & Hartman (2008), society is moving into an age where right-brained, conceptual ways of thinking in combination with the ability to solve problems and think critically will be in demand. Thus the capacity to ask the correct questions and continuously develop products, processes or services is vital for employees to be competitive in today’s workplace.

The second competency is the mastery of *oral and written communication*. Mastery of these skills involves the ability to “articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization” (NACE, 2015a, p. 1). According to NACE (2015a) “the individual has public speaking skill and is able to express ideas to others clearly” (p. 1). When the spoken word is not the needed medium of communication, the individual must be able to “write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports effectively” (NACE, 2015a, p. 1). With the proper use of communication, individuals will be able to take their thoughts, create focus, project energy, and passion to their audience (Wagner, 2008). Considered one of the three “most important skills” by Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006), oral and written communication skills are foundational to the success of any business or organization.

The third workplace readiness competency identified by NACE is *teamwork and collaboration*. These skills are defined by one’s “ability to build relationships with colleagues

and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints” (NACE, 2015a, p. 1). In today’s workforce, teams operate at every level in organizations (Wegner, 2010). Thus new employees need to be “able to work within a team structure, and can negotiate and manage conflict” (NACE, 2015a, p. 1). Further, Wegner (2010) states “organizations are looking for new entrants who can collaborate with others to come up with better solutions than they could on their own” (p. 11). The ability to be a team player and collaborate within diverse groups is, “critical for success in an increasingly complex, multicultural economy” (Olson, 2014, p. 76).

The fourth workplace readiness competency is *information technology application*. Mastery of this skill involves the selection and “use of appropriate technology to accomplish a given task” (Bennett, 2012; NACE, 2015a). With technology rapidly advancing in today’s society, more skilled workers are needed with skills related to computer technology and “the ability to apply computing skills to solve problems” (NACE, 2015a, p. 1). Today’s workforce relies upon individuals with more advanced technical and professional skills than in years past. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) estimates that, “between 2010 and 2020, output in computer systems design and related information technology services is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 6.1 percent” (p. 3). According to Judy & D’Amico (1999), the 21<sup>st</sup> century will rely on knowledgeable employees who are able to “create and apply sophisticated new technologies” (p. 121). With the departure of many baby boomers into retirement, the need for skilled workers within the industry of information technology will continue to grow.

The fifth workplace readiness competency is *leadership*. Leadership describes the ability to “leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others” (NACE, 2015, p. 1). Individuals who exhibit qualities of a leader may

step into the role of change agent (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992) by “creating a vision, identifying the need for change, and implementing the change itself” (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009, p. 75). Leaders are skilled at managing emotions, using empathy to mentor, and organize, prioritize, and delegate work (NACE, 2015a). Skills of this caliber are highly sought after by employers who feel that new entrants are lacking in key leadership skills including: motivating, supervising, and decision-making (Homer & Griffin, 2006).

*Professionalism and work ethic* serves as the sixth workplace readiness competency. According to NACE (2015), individuals who “demonstrate personal responsibility and effective work habits including timeliness, working effectively with others, ability to prioritize tasks, and understand the effect of one’s appearance and actions on the professional work image” (p. 1). Professionalism and work ethic are rated as one of the three “most important” applied skills that are considered necessary for entrants into the world of work to have (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Cossey Simpson, 2014). The demonstration of ethical behavior, acting within “the interests of the broader community, and the ability to learn from one’s mistakes” are also traits used to define an individual’s professionalism and work ethic (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; NACE, 2015). Candidates who have a strong work ethic value high performance in their role and find intrinsic value in their work (Cherrington, 1980; Hill & Petty 1995). New hires must be committed to their work, dependable, professional, and have strong interpersonal skills, otherwise “the organization is at risk of losing productivity and profits” (Hill & Fouts, 2005, p. 48).

The final workplace readiness competency is *career management*. For new entrants into the workplace, showing competency within this area is vital to advancing and succeeding within the current labor market, exploring one’s career path, options for employment, and

understanding which roles best fit their individual skill set and ambitions. Competency in career management consists of the “ability to identify and articulate one’s skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and established career goals while also identify areas necessary for professional growth” (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; NACE, 2015).

Further, these skills help individuals to “navigate the working world and successfully manage the career building process” (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 35). In today’s labor market, workers are consistently faced with the challenge of navigating an ever-changing landscape of training and employment options that form the building blocks of one’s career. The development of career management skills prepare workers not only to build their career but to effectively and intentionally balance their work, learning and personal life throughout their lifetime (Bridgstock, 2009; Webster, Wooden, & Marks, 2004).

The seven workplace readiness competencies identified by NACE (2015), were created utilizing the literature and recent research regarding workplace readiness. “By providing a common vocabulary and framework” for use in discussions regarding career/workplace readiness metric, NACE has created the newest set of guidelines meant to guide the education and advisement of students and inform employers looking to assess the college graduate’s workplace readiness (NACE, 2015a). While the collaboration to create this set of core competencies has the potential to create a plan of attack for universities, understanding the literature on the perceptions and attitudes regarding workplace readiness can provide further support for future programming decisions.

### **Perceptions and Attitudes towards Workplace Readiness**

Within the literature, there are only a small amount of large-scale research surveys involving student’s perception of what it means to be workplace ready. While there are several

small studies focused on student perceptions of workplace readiness, there are few, which are not industry specific. Instead, the research is focused more on the views of industry and the employers whom are hiring students for entry-level positions. This gap in the literature, if filled, has the potential of introducing a new conversation into the field of higher education. “American workers must now be capable of learning new skills and adapting their abilities as jobs are redefined and typically expanded by the economic and organizational models of the times” (Nash & Korte, 1997, p. 79). In an effort to best serve future students, it is important for researchers to review the literature regarding both what employers are currently seeing through their hiring process, and what literature is present about perspectives regarding workplace readiness.

Currently, recent “graduates and employers are both voicing their dissatisfaction with the job abilities new graduates are leaving institutions with” (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Wood, 2004). This dissatisfaction might also stem from a disconnect between the two groups, as a recent study by Harris Interactive in 2013, found that when 2,000 college students were interviewed about their own workplace skill-mastery, that their assessment greatly exceeded hiring managers’ assessments of recent graduates they have interviewed, on every measure. Similar results were echoed in the Prepared U Project as college students highly over-estimated their level of skill-mastery when compared with the responses provided by hiring managers (Bentley University, 2014b). Further, their perceptions of which skills are most important do not align with that of employers (Bentley University, 2014b). Surprisingly enough, despite dissatisfaction with the level of knowledge and skills they are graduating with, “60% of recent college graduates blame their lack of preparedness on themselves” (Bentley University, 2014a, p. 12).

In 2007, a poll of employers showed that almost two-thirds believed that “college graduates lacked the essential skills needed to succeed in the current economy” (Banerji, 2007, para. 1). A few years later, Harris Interactive research found that “only 39% of hiring managers who had worked specifically with hiring recent graduates, felt these interviewees were well prepared for a job in their industry” (Harris Interactive, 2013, p. 3). Finally, most recently, Bentley University’s Prepared U Project found that “61% of business decision-makers give higher education institutions a “C” or lower on preparing their graduates for their first professional roles” (Bentley University, 2014a, p. 6). While many within higher education would argue, the trend amongst recent literature highlights a skills gap and lack of workplace readiness amongst recent graduates. As a result, tension has increased between industry leaders and higher education administrators as both have varying viewpoints regarding the ultimate goal of a college degree. Yet, with the federal government demanding reporting on “gainful employment” from one section of the continuing education industry, many education officials have begun to discuss what changes are necessary to ensure that students are receiving a quality education while also being prepared appropriately for their first professional role within the workplace.

According to a recent study, “74% of college students are confident that graduating from college is a sign that someone is prepared to enter the workforce” (Bentley University, 2014a, p. 10). While the research above appears to point otherwise, it is vital that higher education open up communication with their industry counterparts in an effort to bridge the skills gap that continues to grow as technology continues to advance. By understanding employer expectations of what workplace readiness skills they believe recent graduates should have, higher education can begin to make adjustments in programming and services to assist their students with developing these skills. Australian National Training Authority [ANTA] further highlights the urgency of needing

to address career development for students with a statement from the report, *Towards a Skilled Australia*:

Workplace skills are intensifying. Technical skills are no longer sufficient. At all occupational levels, employees need more generic [soft] skills (such as the ability to communicate effectively). Employees no longer merely perform repetitive tasks. They often work in teams; they take greater responsibility for quality; they solve problems, they work with advanced technologies. (Australian National Training Authority [ANTA], 1994, p. 4)

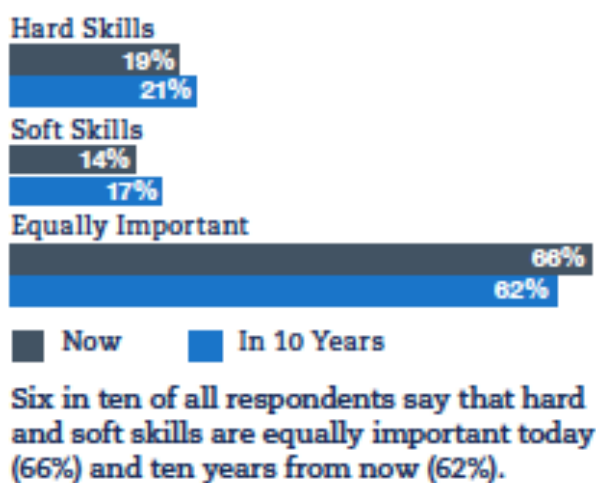
Several studies and surveys have explored what skills employers believe are vital to new hire success in the workplace. Unfortunately, the results show that the skills employers expect to be mastered vary in importance by industry. The Workforce Readiness Report Card, released in 2006, found that aside from the basic fundamentals of reading, writing, and math, that “skills such as teamwork, professionalism, problem solving, self-direction, leadership, written and oral communication, work ethic, and critical thinking were considered even more valuable to employers” (McLester & McIntire, 2006, para. 5-6). In addition to these skills, Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006) also highlighted “professionalism/work ethic, oral and written communication, and problem solving/critical thinking” (p. 7) as being the most important skills that a recent graduate could develop. Throughout the literature regarding workplace readiness expectations, the results point towards a common theme and skill set that a majority of employers expect their new hires to come equipped with: “written and oral communication skills, professionalism, critical thinking skills, teamwork, problem solving skills”, and a solid work ethic (Burke-Smalley & Wheatley, 2015; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2013; Harris Interactive, 2013; McLester & McIntire, 2006). These identified skills can further be categorized into two types of skills: hard skills and soft skills, which research shows, are given differing levels of preference in the hiring process (Bentley University, 2014b; Glenn, 2008; James & James, 2004; Wilhelm, 2004).



**Hard vs. soft skills.** Hard skills can be described as an individual's professional or technical skills that are tangible. These skills have a "high knowledge and technical content" that can only be achieved when one has "achieved a high level of competence within a particular domain" (Chell & Athayde, 2011, p. 616). Soft skills describe an individual's interpersonal skills, ability to communicate, collaborate, and practice patience. According to Rao (2013), when considering the value of hard and soft skills for employment, there are several ideas to be taken into consideration.

- Hard skills are mostly tangible while soft skills are mostly intangible.
- Hard skills depend on the type of trade and industry one is in while soft skills depend on the type of people in the industry and the organizational culture.
- Hard skills are about knowledge of the subject while soft skills are about personality, attitude and behavioral aspects.
- Hard skills are easy to identify and can be measured with accuracy while soft skills are tough to identify and cannot be measured with accuracy.
- Most successful leaders have both hard and soft skills. (Rao, 2013, pp. 3-4)

Ultimately, employers agree that these two skill sets are vital for success in the workplace (James & James, 2004; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; Rao, 2013). More recently, a study conducted by Bentley University (2014a) found that of its respondents, 6 in 10 believe that hard and soft skills are mutually important to initially secure employment, and 62% believe that they will remain equally important 10 years from now (See Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Business leaders compared to recent graduates perception of hard skill vs. soft skill value. From *The Prepared U Project*, (p. 11), by Bentley University. Copyright 2014 by Bentley University. Reprinted with permission.

Within the past ten years, the United States has seen a shift in employment which requires employees to engage with others on a more personal basis than in the past; consequently, only having traditional, technical skills will not be enough to gain employment (ANTA, 1995; Mitchell et al., 2010; Timm, 2005). Further, as the economy forces organizations to down-size, those who hold a combination of hard and soft skills will have a better chance of surviving potential position cuts (James & James, 2004). Though employers have differing opinions regarding which skills they desire most when hiring students, the majority are in agreement that while both sets of skills are necessary to secure employment, that the mastery of soft skills is instrumental in ensuring the success of individuals entering today's workforce are the most important when working within a professional environment (Bentley University, 2014b; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Wilhelm, 2004). In a study by Bentley University (2014b), "57% of recent graduates shared that they wish they would have learned more hard skills in college" (p. 12) despite an overwhelming percentage of corporate recruiters who shared the opposite by wishing college graduates had developed more soft skills in college. According to

Muff (2012), while functional knowledge and skills serve as an important foundation for employees, soft skills are more critical and are what makes the real difference. Of the highly sought-after soft skills, “business leaders rank integrity, professionalism, and a positive attitude as being the most desirable” (Bentley University, 2014b, p. 12).

Another study cited “professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, and oral communications as being the most important soft skills” (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006, p. 7) for job success. While several studies have been conducted regarding which soft skills are the most valuable in the workplace, the results are not consistent across all occupations and industries as seen above. The openness to subjectivity, varying definitions, and a lack of formal means of measurement all influence how these skills are identified and interpreted by organizations within the workplace. While a universal list of soft skills desired by employers is not available, the mutual agreement that these generic skills are necessary to be hired within the workplace today imply that these are not requirements to be ignored.

While the literature offers several examples of the wants and needs of employers when hiring, it is still important for higher education institutions to take into consideration their students’ perspectives regarding the value of these workplace readiness skills. The combination of student and employer input has the potential to aid institutions in identifying what misconceptions about employment should be addressed, and what adjustments to programming can be made to ensure that students feel equipped and prepared to earn their way into the workplace. Without an intervention, graduates will continue to flood the labor market and many will find themselves the victims of underemployment despite being academically qualified to hold higher roles.

## Employment & Underemployment

According to the National Center of Education Statistics, in 2013, close to 1.8 million students were enrolled in higher education with the intent of earning their bachelor's degree, while close to another million students would earn their Master's and Doctoral degrees. With each year, this number has continued to increase as students are driven to halls of higher learning with the intent of building knowledge and securing employment at the level of their degree (Vedder et. al, 2013; Yee, 2012). According to Yee (2012), the current millennial generation sees little to no pathways for economic security outside of college, which drive many to enroll with the hope that their earned degree will provide them with financial security. In addition, studies released by well-known entities such as the College Board or Bureau of Labor Statistics find that "college graduates fair better financially in the labor market as compared to their high school diploma-carrying peers" (Vedder et al., 2013, p. 3). These two situations alone are enough for many students to justify handing over great amounts of money to finance their college degree. Unfortunately it is with increasing frequency that recent graduates are finding themselves to be disappointed with the collegial experience. Upon graduation, many students find themselves not only without a job but also with a large amount of debt that they are unable to begin paying back initially. "Regardless of academic discipline, many recent college graduates are underemployed – a situation that can carry on for months, if not years, after graduation" (Schmitt & Boushey, 2012, p. 87).

**Defining underemployment.** Over time, research and articles have shown that there are multiple definitions and dimensions of underemployment. According to McKee-Ryan and Harvey (2011), "underemployed workers are labeled as inadequately employed, underutilized, underpaid, overeducated, over-skilled, and overqualified or as having low skill utilization or

reemployment quality” (p. 964). Essentially there is no one unifying definition that is used to describe underemployment, which can make in turn make it difficult to measure.

Within the literature, one definition provided by Gerald Glyde (1977) serves as the foundation for many research articles on underemployment:

An involuntary employment condition where workers are in jobs, either part-time or full-time, in which their skills, including formal and work experience training are technically underutilized and thus undervalued relative to those of other individuals who have made equivalent investments in skill development. (p. 246)

Through this definition, underemployment is described as a set of conditions where the number of hours worked, compensation, and skills required to fill a position are incompatible with the skill level of the employee. From an objective standpoint, these factors are straightforward and can be measured with some degree of accuracy. What complicates matters is when researchers look more deeply at the utilization of skills within various professional roles. In the years since Glyde’s (1977) definition was published, there has been much debate regarding what constitutes underemployment and whether or not an individual’s view of their own employment situation should be taken into consideration.

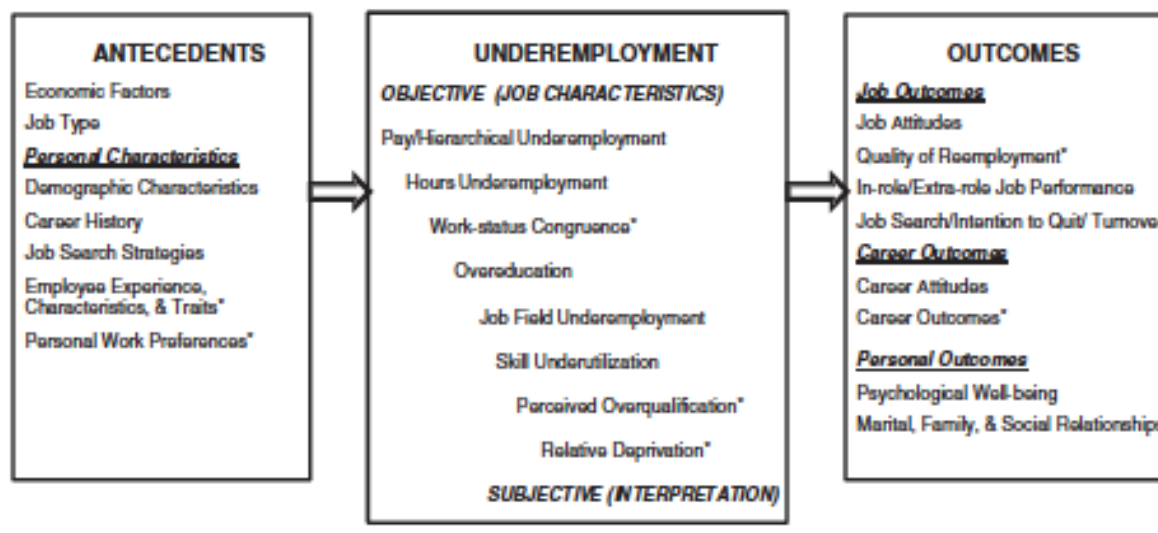
Subjective underemployment describes “employees’ beliefs that they want or should have jobs that are better than the ones they currently hold” (Feldman, Leana, & Bolino, 2002; Livingstone, 2004; Mckee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011; Miller & McKee, 2009). From the perception of over qualification to the belief that one should be entitled to a better job, these ideas directly correlate with an employee’s sense of self and their perceived capabilities within a professional setting. For many workers, education is the link and standard by which they measure whether they are currently underemployed. Feldman (1996) further explains that an individual’s definition of underemployment is often created when comparing their current role to a model state of employment, reflective of their educational experience obtained:

Underemployment is defined relative to the employment experiences of others with the same education or work history; in other cases, underemployment is defined relative to the person's own past education or work history. (p. 387)

The many facets of the labor market have made it increasingly difficult to create one definition that all areas of industry can agree upon. The volume of jobs to be had and the many duties of these positions combined with worker attitudes and experiences within these roles make understanding the concept of underemployment a difficult determination (Jensen & Slack, 2003).

In 1996, Feldman devised “a conceptual model of underemployment that identified precursors and outcomes of experiencing underemployment” (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011, pp. 972-973). Additionally, he named five factors that comprise underemployment including: being academically overqualified for a position, “holding a job outside one's formal training” experience, having skills that cannot be utilized in the position, “working in a part-time, temporary”, or intermittently involuntarily, and “earning 20% less than in one's previous job or than one's peers” (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011, p. 973). Over the years, researchers have contributed new factors to Feldman's original list with many representing the subjective views of employees' thoughts towards being underemployed. McKee-Ryan and Harvey's resulting model of underemployment introduces an array of factors, both objective and subjective, that highlight what factors precede underemployment and what outcome occurs as a result of the underemployment experience (See Figure 3).

## Theoretical Approaches to Underemployment



\*Indicates dimensions added since Feldman's (1996) review.

Figure 3. Theoretical approaches to underemployment. Reprinted from "I Have a Job, But . . .": A Review of Underemployment, (p. 971), by F. McKee-Ryan & J. Harvey. Copyright 2011 by F. McKee-Ryan & J. Harvey. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3 serves as a helpful model that illustrates what many recent college graduates are experiencing as they enter into the labor force for the first time. By attempting to influence the antecedents that often lend themselves to underemployment, higher education degree programs and society can proactively work towards providing graduates with the support and tools needed to secure gainful employment upon graduation.

### Gainful Employment

Since 2010, the United States government and Obama Administration have focused much of their attention on the federal student aid crisis that continues to mount as recent graduates' debt-to-earning levels continue to widen. In July of 2010, "the Obama administration released a set of proposed regulations that require for-profit career colleges to take steps to better prepare students for gainful employment or risk losing access to their federal student aid" (Department of

Education, 2010, para.1). Given the nickname, the “gainful employment” laws, the proposed rules were written with the intention of protecting students from procuring debt that they are unable to repay, and also to protect current taxpayers from the large loan default rates. In the Department of Education’s (2010) summary of the July 2010 Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, a quote from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan seeks to explain the purpose behind the proposed gainful employment regulations:

While career colleges play a vital role in training our workforce to be globally competitive, some of them are saddling students with debt they cannot afford in exchange for degrees and certificates they cannot use. These schools and their investors benefit from billions of dollars in subsidies from taxpayers, and in return, taxpayers have a right to know that these programs are providing solid preparation for a job. The rules we've proposed today will help ensure that career college and training programs use federal student aid to prepare students for success. (p. 1)

Though the gainful employment regulations have only been introduced within the past six years, the data that serves as the foundation for this movement began being collected as early as the 1990s. For over 20 years, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has gathered data to determine whether federal funds are being spent efficiently and to review how well government programs and policies are meeting their objectives (United States Government Accountability Office, n.d., para. 4). Their work includes gathering information on for-profit institutions and their graduates’ completion of occupation-specific programs.

Though enrollment in higher education had steadily increased since the 1990s, from 2000-2008 student enrollment almost tripled, reaching close to two million students. (Program Integrity: Gainful Employment, 2010). For-profit institutions worked furiously to attract many of these students to enroll in their academic programs, with many pioneering new approaches to recruiting, teaching, and graduating students (Program Integrity: Gainful Employment, 2010). With the federal government supplementing much of for-profit institutions’ revenue through



Federal student aid programs, the GAO began reporting on the success of these occupation-specific programs in relation to graduates' ability to be competitive and versatile within the labor market. Through collected data, the GAO found that graduates who participated in programs “lacking a general education component were restricted in their employment opportunities and did not fare as well in supporting themselves, their families, and in their ability to repay student loans” (Program Integrity: Gainful Employment, 2010, p. 43617). With these less than favorable results being captured by the Government Accountability Office, the Secretary of Education made the decision to put pressure on higher education through requiring measurable outcomes, beginning with for-profit institutions.

**Gainful employment rules.** The gainful employment regulations became effective on July 1, 2015 after being modified and adjusted in response to public hearings and critique given. According to the new regulations, for-profit career-specific programs are “considered to lead to gainful employment if the average graduates' estimated annual loan payment does not exceed 20% of their discretionary income or 8% of their total earnings” (Department of Education, 2014, para. 3). For programs that exceed this percentage, the associated institutions would be held responsible and at risk of losing their federal student aid funding.

The official framework for the gainful employment regulations involves “two components: accountability and transparency” (Department of Education, 2014, para. 2). The accountability component of the new guidelines determines which programs provide training that is both affordable and leads to lucrative employment. In addition, programs that leave students with a high debt to income ratio will also be exposed. The transparency component of the gainful employment regulations describes the responsibility of institutions to publicly disclose program performance and the measured outcomes of their gainful employment programs. As seen in

Figure 4, institutional gainful employment programs will be marked as either Pass, Zone, Fail, or Ineligible based upon their ability to meet the necessary requirements.

<b>Accountability</b>	
<b>Certifications:</b> Institutions must certify that each of their gainful employment programs meet state and federal licensure, certification, and accreditation requirements.	
<b>Metric:</b> To maintain title IV eligibility, gainful employment programs will be required to meet minimum standards for the debt vs earnings of their graduates.	
<b>Pass</b>	Programs whose graduates have annual loan payments less than 8% of total earnings <u>OR</u> less than 20% of discretionary earnings.
<b>Zone</b>	Programs whose graduates have annual loan payments between 8% and 12% of total earnings <u>OR</u> between 20% and 30% of discretionary earnings.
<b>Fail</b>	Programs whose graduates have annual loan payments greater than 12% of total earnings <u>AND</u> greater than 30% of discretionary earnings.
<b>Ineligible</b>	Programs that fail in 2 out of any 3 consecutive years <u>OR</u> are in the zone for 4 consecutive years.
<b>Transparency</b>	
<b>Disclosures:</b> Institutions will be required to make public disclosures regarding the performance and outcomes of their gainful employment programs. The disclosures will include information such as costs, earnings, debt and completion rates.	

Figure 4. Gainful employment regulations framework. From *Obama Administration announces final rules to protect students from poor-performing career college programs* [Press release], (para. 2), by the Department of Education. Copyright 2014 by the Department of Education. Reprinted with permission.

In addition to the efforts made by the Obama administration to ensure that for-profit institutions are meeting the professional needs of their student body, other steps are also in the process of being taken to address problems at low performing institutions. First, the Department of Education will “formalize an interagency task force to ensure that for-profit institutions are being appropriately monitored such that students will be protected from any potential deceptive policies or practices” (Department of Education, 2014, para. 13). Secondly, student debt is being made more manageable through the offer of flexible repayment options. This outreach focuses

on helping borrowers to repay their loans and avoid future default. Third, a new higher education ratings system will be created to highlight schools based upon their value vs. investment. Not only will this serve as an opportunity to showcase schools that effectively work towards promoting student success, but also incentivize those who are working towards improving their student outcomes. Finally, the Obama Administration will strengthen their monitoring of federal programs that support service members and veterans within higher education. Through the implementation of the gainful employment regulations and additional efforts, the Department of Education challenges current institutions to push the boundaries and defy the status quo of student outcomes or face the consequences.

**Implications of gainful employment regulations.** “According to the Department of Education, about 1,400 higher education programs serve 840,000 students, of which 99% of these students are currently enrolled in for-profit institutions whose programs would not pass the new gainful employment regulations” (Department of Education, 2015, para. 5). With many for-profit students paying four times the cost of tuition at an average community college, the implications of the results of gainful employment regulations is paramount to the future success of for-profit institutions.

Currently, over 80% of students at for-profit institutions have to take out federal student loans in order to cover the costs for their tuition. As a result, these students represent “44% of all federal student loan defaults” (Department of Education, 2015, para. 6). Unfortunately, many students enroll into for-profit institutions with the hope that they will be able to secure a profitable full-time job upon graduation but find themselves left with unsustainable debt and a degree that does not aid them in the employment process. For programs that do not pass the accountability standards, changes will need to be made quickly in order to avoid sanctions by the

federal government. For those that continue to disregard the need for change, the associated institution will become ineligible to receive federal student aid. Without this revenue from student enrollment, many for-profit institutions would face the possibility of closure.

Since its implementation, the Department of Education has experienced increased resistance from for-profit institutions regarding gainful employment reporting. Though these regulations have not been extended to include non-profit institutions, the threat of future accountability has challenged many public and private, non-profit institutions to consider how they too can increase the marketability and preparedness of their student body. With the underemployment of graduates across the nation drawing increased notice from the federal government, many non-profit institutions are fearful that without addressing this issue that they too will soon have to report on the employment outcomes of their students. As a result, many are seeking out their career services departments to establish a plan of action for addressing the skills gap and reimagining career development across the university system.

### **Career Services in Higher Education**

Since the first higher education institutions opened their doors, one of the goals of these halls of higher learning has been to help prepare students for entry into a specific profession based upon their skills and professional aspirations (Herr, Rayman, & Garis, 1993). Not only are colleges and universities responsible for increasing the knowledge of their student body, but members of the student body also view their college education as a stepping-stone for entry into desired positions within the future workforce. While many colleges and universities now have career centers and professional staff dedicated to supporting students in their career education, this was not always the case.

**History of career services in higher education.** In the early part of the nineteenth century, career services provided by the university came in the shape of students' professors. Towards the time of graduation, professors would meet with employers who had the potential for offering employment or an apprenticeship to their students in an effort to provide their recommendation. By speaking on behalf of their students, professors essentially were responsible for the "placement" of their students and aiding them in the transition from their study to work. With the need for a more knowledgeable labor force, universities such as Oxford and Yale began to establish departments solely dedicated to placing students in work after graduation as early as 1899 (Wrenn, 1951), thus removing this responsibility from professors. These offices held similar missions of aiding the student body in securing an apprenticeship or employment throughout the year and after graduation.

Outside collegiate walls, industries were also undergoing change with the application of science to their processes as scientific and experimental methods grew in popularity (Goldin & Katz, 1999). The late 19<sup>th</sup> century became known as a time of great urbanization and expansion as chemistry and physics were applied in the manufacturing of steel, chemicals, petroleum, and goods used to produce electricity (Kevles, 1979). These changes in industry lead to a greater demand for scientists with formal training. Understanding that this was just the beginning of a new age of industry, universities began to expand their course and study offerings to meet the needs for a more skilled labor force. By 1910, as industry and technology continued to shape the landscape of the working world, "the American university as an institution had taken shape" (Hofstadter et al., 1952, p. 31).

From 1910 to 1940, "enrollment in higher education would increase more than three-fold, while enrollment would nearly quadruple from 1940 to 1970" (Goldin & Katz, 1999, p. 41).

During these years, the scope of institutions would also undergo a variety of changes as research universities began to emerge and both independent professional institutions and theological, denominational institutions declined. Higher education became seen as a secure gateway for students to enter into the professional world. With advancements in technology constantly changing the skills needed to be at the top of one's industry, holding a college diploma became a minimum requirement for employers looking to hire students with the knowledge needed to excel in these specialized fields. By the 1970's, each institution and college housed a form of career services department that placed graduates into professional positions, but did not educate students during their time at the institution. These "placement offices" were often invisible amongst the other major institutional departments since they did not play an academic role and were often only sought out at the time of graduation.

The tide did not begin to turn for career services departments until the 1970's when the United States government and Department of Education started to shift their focus towards higher education via the passing of the "Vocational Education Act of 1963 and Vocational Education Act Amendments of 1968" (Herr, 1976, p. 6). This historic legislation cited the need for exemplary programs to improve the education of students at all levels while also providing new and more effective methods for providing job preparation needs. The Vocational Education Act was "written with regard to career development theory including how an individual chooses their occupation, collects information, and the effects of attitudes and work values" (Herr, 1976, p. 6). The insights presented during this time were deemed important not only for institutions of vocational education but higher education as well, especially as both types of institutions share a common goal of supporting students and preparing them for their professional calling.

This shared outcome for higher education led to the coining of the term career education by the United States Office of Education in 1971, and initiated a change in attitude towards the role that career services offices would play in the lives of students (Herr et al., 1976). Identifying career education as a focal point for higher education institutions resulted in the 1970's serving as a time of transformation for career services (McGrath, 2002). During this time in education, declining student enrollment led many higher education institutions to find ways to compete for prospective students and retain their existing students. Administrators quickly realized that helping students develop employability skills and supporting them through the employment search process was attractive to students. This realization led to the transformation of career services from old-fashioned placement offices to full-service career education and employment departments.

In the mid 1980s a high demand for university graduates saw a brief return of the old "placement center" mentality when Fortune 500 companies were actively seeking entry-level talent on campuses around the country (Rayman, 1993b). Unfortunately, this strategy did not last long as social and economic factors converged together, forcing higher education to reimagine the objectives of career centers in the 1990s (Rayman, 1993b). The economic recession of the 1990s created a tense environment within the labor market as current graduates found themselves in direct competition with college-educated employees with years of work experience who had been laid off in light of the recession. The anxiety resulting from the competitive labor market permeated back to the campus career center where the demand for outreach programs, workshops, career planning and counseling services reached an all-time high (Rayman 1993a).

To this day, many career services departments or career centers have adopted a new model for assisting students that includes services such as internship consultations, career

counseling, and helping with employment searches. With many small and major employers less willing to recruit directly from colleges and universities, career centers have found themselves teaching students how to actively engage during the employment process to set themselves apart from other applicants for the same position. For many prospective students, the variety of services offered by higher education institution career services departments often serves as the determining factor for whether they will enroll. For existing students, it also can determine whether they re-enroll or seek a school with greater connections to the working world. With a college diploma no longer serving as a guarantee for graduates to land a desired job, institutions to this day continue to expand their career center functions in an effort to meet the demands of the workforce.

**Functions and professional standards of a career center.** For many students and faculty, the name “career center defines an office of the university that seniors visit in their last semester before graduation with the intent of being placed within the working world” (Rayman, 1993b, p. 7). This traditional view is no longer an accurate description of these centers, who now offer an expanded menu of services to students that build upon these placement activities with the added addition of counseling, programming events and professional development workshops.

In 2014, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) published a document entitled *NACE Professional Standards for College and University Career Services* (NACE, 2014). This comprehensive document (see Appendix D) serves as the current standards and guidelines for career centers in colleges and universities across the nation. Key components include a statement of mission and program specifics. The guidelines are clear on what the mission of a career service department should be.

Career services must advance the mission of the institution as well as support academic and experiential learning programs to promote student learning and student development.



Within this context, the primary purpose of career services is to assist students and other designated clients in developing, evaluating, and/or implementing career, education, and employment decisions and plans. (NACE, 2014, p. 5)

When establishing the ideal university career services program, there are several components that should be taken into consideration regarding its development. From programs provided by the institution to financial resources and technology, each of these components are key to providing collegiate students with the support needed to make a successful transition from the university level to graduate school or the workforce. With today's career services offices having to "face the challenge of reconciling the different expectations of students, employers, campus administrators, and faculty," (McGrath, 2002, p. 72) many offices have increased their visibility and expanded their menu of services.

For today's career services offices, recommended *program components* include: career advising/counseling, online and distance career services, career information, employment services, graduate and professional school planning, and experiential learning (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), 2008; NACE, 2014). Each of these programs offered by career centers offers students an opportunity to explore their future career paths with the support of a professional staff member who is knowledgeable and trained in these areas. Of the programs offered through career centers, career advising/counseling is one of the most commonly used by students. Though the number of students choosing to enter higher education each year continues to rise, many of these prospective students are unsure about their future career path. Many of these students seeks out the services of a career counselor not only for advice, but to also take advantage of career assessments which "help students to learn more about their strengths, interests, personality and skills" (Reitter, 2010, p. 20). The result of these assessments can often provide guidance as students consider their strengths in relation to specific

industries or career fields. Additional components of career counseling include guiding students towards specific career information and employment opportunities, setting present and future goals, aiding in the identification of appropriate graduate and professional school programs, providing experiential learning opportunities, and helping all students make reasonable and educated career choices that marry their knowledge of their goals with up to date information of the current labor force (CAS, 2008; NACE, 2014). While career counseling can occur at any stage of a student's life, the earlier that students engage in the process, the more time can be devoted to assisting a student on their journey to future career satisfaction.

The *organization and administration* of a university career services office is vital for ensuring that goals of the career services department support the institutional mission and align with the needs of all constituencies being served. To do this, colleges and universities must be strategic in the appointment of leadership as well as establishing a core team of professionals to “provide strategic direction for accomplishment of mission and goals” (NACE, 2014, p. 17) as well as the overall management of career services for the institution. The career services director (title may vary dependent upon institution), serves as the primary leader of the career services office at collegiate institutions. Dependent upon the size of the institution and departmental reporting structure, the career services office can be led by a staff of one person or have a team of many specialized staff. The personnel of the career services office engage with a diverse constituency and are privy to the unique traits of the current student body and the current needs of the surrounding university community (Livengood, 2012). As a result, it is important for the staff and leadership of these career centers to be mindful when determining which standards, rules, and regulations will guide best practices in serving students, alumni, employers and external stakeholders of the institution (Livengood, 2012). Over the years, this task has become

more challenging as the landscape of society and the workforce continues to change with increasing speed. According to Herr and Cramer, (1996), as cited in Rayman (1999), career services is “a profession in transition” that will need a “focused and recognizable identity”, if the industry intends to “adequately meet the ever-changing career development needs of students and alumni” (p. 178). Through the appointment of strong leaders willing to take on this challenge, career services offices will have the foundation needed to be successful in supporting career development initiatives at the collegiate level.

Once appropriate leadership has been selected to lead a career services office, “attention should be given to *human resources* and hiring the appropriate number of professional staff needed to fulfill the functions and mission of the office” (NACE, 2014, p. 17). Higher education institutions should seek to employ a staff of diverse individuals whom can serve as role models for current students and alumni, while also being equipped to support the building of partnerships both inside and outside the campus community. With an ever-increasingly diverse student body entering into the halls of higher education each year, individuals filling the professional roles of career services offices must also be equipped to “design new and alternative service delivery modes as well as be informed on how best to meet the needs of special populations” (Rayman, 1999, p. 180). Career counselors or professional staff should have experience with or receive training that is specific to meeting the needs of those students whose disability may lead to career development needs that are unique (Boen, Brown & Roessler, 1994) as well as being aware of marginalized populations who may face unique career issues as they seek employment (Sailer, Korschgen, & Lokken, 1994). Securing staff that are able to navigate the challenges being posed to current students and alumni by society and the workforce today is vital. Further, finding staff that are willing to think beyond tradition methods and are open to

new practices will serve their institutions well as the nature of employment, career development, and recruitment changes.

To effectively meet the needs of the institution, “the career services office must have adequate *financial resources* to ensure the achievement of its mission and goals” (NACE, 2014, p. 23). To establish funding priorities for the year, career services office must consider the cost of programming, departmental expenditures, and resources needed to support students effectively. From this research, a budget proposal can be created that is further supported with a needs-based analysis detailing the needs of students and alumni. Other funding strategies should also be considered as the office “cultivates external sources of funding that could be utilized for special projects, programs and scholarships” (NACE, 2014, p. 23).

In addition to appropriate funding, the facilities within which career services offices are housed must be strategically equipped and placed such that access is appropriate for the constituency being served (NACE, 2014). It is important for the career services office to be situated geographically near other student support offices such that their close proximity makes access easier for student as well as supporting collaboration between offices. According to Williams (2007), it is noticeable when the career services office is isolate at the edge of a campus, so much so that “staff are less positive about the effectiveness of their work with students than where the services is fully integrated into the institutional student support network” (p. 354). While in this information age, students have instant access to massive quantities of data; there is still an inherent need for a designated space where “personalized, intelligent, informed human interactions,” (Rayman, 1999. p. 179) can occur. Aside from traditional office spaces needed to house the professional staff within the office, appropriate materials and resources must

also be made available for student use as well as to support staff who are constantly shifting and meeting with various types of constituents.

Within the past 20 years, the nature of university career services has changed as offices turn away from the strict traditional practice of providing only in-house services to a more modern approach that capitalizes on the use of *technology* for these same purposes. According to NACE (2014), “career services staff must be knowledgeable of current trends and the uses of technology to deliver and support career programs and services” (p. 25). For many higher education institutions, technology has changed the face of how services can be delivered, such that in some cases these services are available 24 hours a day. Before computers were available, students were responsible for making appointments and physically visiting career services offices to receive assistance. Today, technology is impacting every area of career services including the adoption of automated interviewing scheduling systems, online job posting portals, and video interviewing (Behrens & Altman, 1998). Further, career services offices are required to have departmental websites as well as access to platforms or electronic programs that offer online support and career development opportunities for students. One of the main concerns of institutions, which have shaped the ways in which technology has been integrated into career services, is finding the appropriate balance of high touch and high tech methods of providing services to students, alumni, and employers (NACE, 2007; Rayman, 1999). Career center leadership and staff must determine which portion of their services including mock interviewing, job searching, and resume and cover letter writing should be completed in person vs. online without diminishing the quality of service received (Behrens & Altman, 1998). The ultimate goal of career services office in regards to technology will be finding a method of maintaining the quality of services provided whether delivered in person or online, while also finding creative and modern methods of engaging students in the career development process early on in

their college career. By developing a strategic technology plan, career services offices will be able to navigate the rapid changes in technology as well as remaining up-to-date with the integration of new technology for career services as it becomes available.

In order to be truly successful, career services must consider the development and maintenance of institutional and external stakeholder relationships that support the mission and goals of the office (NACE, 2014). By forging relationships amongst the campus community, the career services department is setting themselves up to “take advantage of the “multiplier effect” that these partnerships can have in working towards their goal of enhanced student career development” (Rayman, 1999, p. 179). By working with campus faculty, career services staff can gain insight into industry-specific vocabulary and current employment opportunities that could be disseminated to students who are interested in work within that industry (Brooks, 1996). Campus faculty members remain up-to-date on their respective industries and can offer thoughts regarding what skills and professional experiences employers are seeking in their new hires. Building partnerships with on-campus student organizations allows career services staff to seek out employers who are looking to target specific groups within the student population. In return, student organizations can also provide career services with information regarding student desires for employment and assist in identifying internships, networking opportunities, and influential leaders that students are interested in engaging with (Brooks, 1996). This information can provide points of contact for staff as well as proving to students that they are taking their needs and wants into consideration. Two other influential stakeholder groups include alumni and parents. According to Rayman (1999), “many career professionals recognize that parents have the power to influence and motivate their students into taking responsibility and action regarding their career destiny” (p. 180). In addition, alumni can be powerful contacts to have in the current

workforce. Not only can they provide insight into the current state of hiring practices, but also can serve as mentors or the key to opening up recruitment opportunities for students. Developing a plan to engage institutional and external stakeholders in the career development process will ensure that the university is consistent regarding their approach to building these internal and external relationships. Williams (2007) highlights the value of developing this type of plan in the following statement:

Developing an institutional strategy that places employability and careers at the heart of the student experience allows for the incorporation of extant schemes so that initiatives are no longer duplicated and resources throughout the institution are used more effectively. (p. 357)

The final component of institutional career services involves the development of *employer relations* and provision of *recruitment services*. Career services departments are responsible not only for the initial establishment of relationships with employers but also in the development of best practices and policies surrounding the recruitment process. According to NACE (2014), employers are key “partners in the educational process and are also primary customers for higher education career services“ (p. 29). Career services offices serve as a “portal for employers to interact with the institution and to hire recent graduates for internships and full-time positions” (Boettcher, 2009, p. 45). Over the past 10 years, market trends have shown a change in the process by which employers engage with higher education institutions and its students. With the ability to promote their businesses and open positions online, many employers have stopped taking advantage of traditional recruitment opportunities on campuses, and instead leverage technology and social media to recruit new hires. As a result, career services staff will need to develop new and modern methods for attracting employers to campus, whether through the adoption of new programming, revamping of career fairs, incorporation of networking activities, or support of virtual interviews and information sessions. Career services

are a “hub of information about what higher education currently offers, the types of students enrolled, and about the skills and talents that they have to offer to various places of business” (Williams, 2007, pp. 358-359). Supported appropriately, career services staff will be able to “develop, maintain, and enhance relationships with employers that may provide career development and employment opportunities for students” (NACE, 2014, p. 29).

The guidelines, as written above, showcase the present-day career center as a department that plays a vital role in the academic and professional development of students. By using these professional standards as the foundation of their career center practice, colleges and universities are given the tips and tools needed to facilitate excellence through the development of career education programs and services (NACE, 2014). With a cry for change echoing across the nation, higher education finds itself in a position where traditional practices may not be enough to support students as they enter the workplace and leave the comforts of college behind.

### **Chapter Summary**

While within the last few years, the topic of workplace readiness has gained increasing attention by the public; the literature has shown how this topic is not new but instead manifests itself based upon the current trends of the labor market during that time. As society continues to advance and the workplace continue to change, it has become increasingly important for higher education to consider how the development of these skills fits within the academic realm.

This review of the available literature has shown how the definition of workplace readiness has developed over time and current corporate expectations regarding which of these skills are most valued in the workplace and hiring process. The employer cited lack of these skills in new hires is linked to an increase in the underemployment of recent graduates across the nation. Research indicates that there are several factors that have influenced this rise, including a



changing need in the labor force. As a result of the underemployment of many recent graduates, the United States government has released gainful employment regulations to monitor student outcomes of for-profit higher education institutions. The literature identifies the importance of these regulations for ensuring that students are not putting money into an institution that is not aiding students in reaching desired career outcomes. Research has indicated that career development of students in higher education is dependent upon the career services office within the institution. The literature indicates that the role of career services has changed over the years in response to the changing needs of society and the workforce. Little research has been done to identify student perceptions of workplace readiness and institutional-provided career preparation. Chapter 3 will focus on the methodology used in this research study to determine senior undergraduates and first year alumni perceptions of their workplace readiness and the career preparation provided by the institution. The results of this study will be used to provide further insight and guide higher education institutions as they seek to implement changes to their practice that will bridge the gap between higher education and the professional workplace.

### Chapter Three: Methods

The purpose of this research is to explore both undergraduate and recent graduate's understanding of what it means to be ready for the workplace and how their personal experience in a higher education institution did or did not assist them in developing these necessary skills. The study sought to understand how recent graduates perceive the value of their degree and its return on their investment. The outcome of this study provides higher education administration and staff with insight into the minds of their student body and recent graduates regarding their perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in the career development programming provided by the institution. This insight can equip higher education professionals with the knowledge needed to guide program development such that they can effectively serve the student community.

The central guiding research question that guides the study is:

- What are undergraduate students' and recent graduates' perceptions of the quality of career preparation provided by their institution?

Sub questions:

1. What skills do undergraduate seniors and recent graduates define as being workplace-readiness skills?
2. What skills do undergraduate seniors and recent graduates perceive as being most important to secure a degree-appropriate job?
3. What university-offered resources would assist undergraduate students in developing workplace-readiness skills that are not currently offered?
4. What activities do students perceive as most valuable in preparing them for the world of work?

## Research Design & Role of the Researcher

Onwuegbuzie (2002) states, "...a false dichotomy exists between quantitative and qualitative approaches and researchers should make the most efficient use of both paradigms in order to understand educational and social phenomena" (p. 521). For the purpose of this research, an embedded mixed method design was utilized. Gray (2010) cited Hanson et al. who suggested that using mixed methods allows researchers to "gain a richer, contextual understanding of the phenomena being researched" (p. 204). This research study examined current undergraduate seniors' and first-year alumni perceptions of workplace readiness and institutional-provided career preparation programming. Perceptions and personal experiences specific to career development and how students identify with, gain, and define workplace readiness were all part of the research process in an effort to make meaning of students' perceived value and role of career development.

Within an embedded mixed methods study, the researcher must determine whether the two data sets collected are combined into a single analysis that will address the research questions being asked, or whether one set of data will be used to build upon a preliminary data set's results (Creswell, 2009). Target groups of undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni were studied. The two data sets were collected and combined for one main analysis with the quantitative component carrying more weight. The qualitative component was embedded within the quantitative workplace readiness online survey to better explore students' perceptions of the role their institution played in their career preparation. The collection of the quantitative and qualitative data was gathered concurrently within a single online survey. The quantitative response analysis was compared with themes emerging from the qualitative data (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011).

In any research study, reflexivity must be taken into consideration when interpreting and analyzing results of gathered data. According to Creswell (2009), reflexivity describes the “identification of personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study” (p. 207). My background, current professional role, and personal experiences all effect how the survey responses are interpreted and should be identified in a statement of assumptions.

As a working professional in higher education that deals specifically with the issue of workplace readiness and career preparation, the researcher’s opinions and experiences surrounding this issue are grounded within the values the researcher holds as an educator. Knowing employers’ current perceptions of the researcher’s students’ level of workplace readiness and the great need for further intervention at the university level is frustrating and challenging. With the microscope pointed towards higher education and the government scrutinizing institutions’ role in student career development, several institutions have begun making changes in the way they prepare students for life outside of college. As a professional working closely with career services in student development, this researcher believes it is the duty of all professional staff and programming in higher education to aid the professional development of students such that they can be successful in the current workplace.

The researcher assumed, based upon personal experience and the literature reviewed for this research, that career development and teaching workplace readiness skills are not generally a part of current academic curricula. If it is, it is not addressed equally across schools or majors. It was also assumed that students are not educated on what workplace readiness skills employers are looking for within the various industries or how students can develop these skills through professional experiences. The researcher also assumed that the lack of student knowledge on workplace readiness leads to a lack of understanding regarding the role that both the student and

the institution can play in that student's career development. The researcher expected to hear that both undergraduates and recent graduates believe their institution could have taken greater strides to provide programming or experiential learning opportunities to aid in their career preparation.

### **Sources of Data**

As of the latest figures made available in 2012, “approximately 2,968 4-year higher education institutions exist in the United States. Of this number, 1,600 private, nonprofit institutions exist nationwide” (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities [NAICU], 2014, para. 1). One private, non-profit higher education institution in California was the targeted institution for this research. The number of undergraduate seniors and recent graduates within the past two years is 1,383 and 667 respectively. In 2015, the institution was ranked number 52 out of 280 national universities. A diverse field of over 80 programs of study is offered to students in combination with relatively small class sizes. The target institution has an undergraduate graduation rate of over 80% and has a diverse student body that represents a cross-section of preparation and majors with demographics similar to that of other private, 4-year institutions (College Measures, 2015).

The target population for this research involved two groups: current undergraduate seniors and the most recent graduating class of Undergraduate seniors who were close to graduating and entering into the workforce for the first-time as full-time employees. First year graduates were able to reflect on their perceptions and experiences of workplace readiness during their years of college while also providing insight after having gained experience in the workplace. By targeting this private, non-profit institution, the researcher gained insight into how workplace readiness is currently affecting students and how it affected recent graduates.

### **Sampling Method and Sample Size**

A convenience sampling approach was utilized to invite students and graduates who meet selection criteria from the targeted institution. Based upon records from the target institution, the size of the target population was approximately 1,100 current undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni. The approximate number of first-year graduates consisted of 760 individuals while the approximate number of current seniors was 740. The criterion for inclusion in this research study involved the following requirements:

1. Undergraduate seniors meeting requirements for graduation in May 2016.
2. First-year alumni records show that the individual graduated from the university in May 2015.

Two hundred thirteen undergraduate seniors and forty-two first-year alumni participated in the research study. Access to subjects was gained through the institutions' internal systems and students and graduates were contacted via an email invitation. Permission was obtained from the Dean of the undergraduate college to utilize the email list of current undergraduate seniors and recent graduates who graduated from the university within the past year.

### **Data Collection Strategies and Procedures**

Data was collected through the use of online surveys administered through *Qualtrics*, a survey administration tool that supports the capture of both quantitative data and qualitative data. Each subgroup received a distinct survey. The surveys contained a combination of scaled items and open-ended questions with the intention of understanding student and recent graduates' perceptions of workplace readiness and the role of the institution in their career development. The quantitative data focused on understanding students' perceptions of the value of specific workplace readiness skills and their necessity for being considered career ready. The qualitative

data focused on the students' and recent graduates' perspective of the university experience and the role that institutions play when supporting students to become workplace ready.

An online survey method was considered the best approach for gaining responses from recent graduates who are no longer geographically close to the institution as well as ease of completion for senior students who are experienced with web-based tools for both learning and assessment. Using a survey administration tool ensured subject anonymity and served as an incentive for increasing participation for those subjects who were concerned about sharing their personal perceptions and attitudes regarding their current school or alma mater.

### **Tools/Instruments Used**

The online surveys tools for this research study were created by the researcher and consisted of two sections. Basic demographic questions along with institutional-specific background questions gave insight about the respondent, while new items about workplace readiness and perceptions of the institution's support for career preparation were developed based upon the current research on the employment skills gap (Bentley University, 2014a; Chegg & Harris Interactive, 2013) and the key competencies of career readiness (NACE, 2015).

The Senior Workplace Readiness Survey (see Appendix E) was used to collect data regarding undergraduate seniors perceptions of their workplace readiness level and quality of preparation. The online survey, delivered through Qualtrics, was disseminated once to all undergraduate seniors through an email sent to their university email account. Two domains were contained within the survey; part I for student demographic/background information and part II for questions regarding university workforce development and preparation. Part I of the survey contained demographic and background questions to identify gender, ethnicity/race,

employment history, and the career preparation activities engaged in by the participant during their time as a student. Responses to the questions set the foundation for part II.

Part II of the survey asked questions related to students' perception of their own workplace readiness and the quality of university provided workplace development. Several of the questions were open-ended to provide the respondent with the opportunity to expand upon their experiences. One question provided fourteen different workforce skills and asked students to self-assess the level with which the university supported them in the development of that skill. The question used a 5-point scale with 1 representing not prepared and 5 representing well prepared. One of the final questions requested for the respondent to rate the quality of workforce development provided by the target institution during their time as a student. The survey instrument was applied to answer both the central guiding research question and sub-questions.

The Alumni Workplace Readiness Survey (see Appendix F) is a survey tool that was used to collect data regarding first-year alumni perceptions of the quality of workplace readiness preparation provided by their alma mater. The main difference between the Senior and Alumni Workplace Readiness Survey was the wording used with Alumni to suggest that they reflect back to their time as a student within the University when answering the questions provided.

**Survey validity & reliability.** To determine what questions would appropriately address and seek to answer the research questions, the researcher requested input from the Executive Director of Career Services and the Associate Director of Career Services. Utilizing their expertise, the final version of each survey included a combination of quantitative items and open-ended questions to provide some qualitative data.

To ensure content validity, the survey instruments were shared with the Manager of Student Employment, the Career Center Executive Director, and the Associate Dean of Student



Affairs for Planning, Operations, and Assessment, all experts in the fields of career services and workplace readiness. The expert panel reviewed the survey tools and provided suggestions for modifications to ensure that the questions were not leading and that they related appropriately to the central guiding research question. Through the feedback provided by the expert panel, the researcher modified the order of the survey to improve the flow of the survey while also adjusting the number of open-ended questions requesting reasoning behind answers provided to specific questions. Additionally, the wording of two questions were altered to reduce potential confusion while instructions were also added before the scale items to ensure survey participants understood the expectations for answering that portion of the survey.

To ensure the tool's reliability, the version created for seniors was piloted with a small group of ten undergraduate students, not including seniors of the target institution. A link to the survey was sent asking for a response over a 3-day period. Responses were reviewed to ensure that there were no errors in the survey functionality. Open-ended question responses were also reviewed to see if the nature of the responses addressed the question appropriately. Feedback provided by participants cited that they enjoyed the survey and that it was easy to understand. Two students shared that there were too many open-ended questions, and that this lengthened the process beyond the anticipated time needed to complete the survey. In response, the researcher adjusted the expected survey time allotment and highlighted the statement that responses to survey questions were voluntary and that questions could be skipped if that is the preference of the participant. As the general focus, content and functionality of the alumni version is essentially the same, a pilot with alumni will not be conducted however the survey functionality will be tested by several individuals prior to distribution to the targeted alumni.

## **Procedures**

The link to the online survey was embedded within an email that provided informed consent to the recipient and gave them the option to agree to voluntarily participate in the survey or exit from the survey. Current undergraduate seniors and recent graduates received the link to this survey after a general email was sent out, informing all of the purpose of the research study. The invitation for current undergraduate seniors was sent within 1 month of their pending graduation. Participation was voluntary and recipients were informed that the survey would be available for 3 weeks. Alumni invitations were also sent during the Spring requesting their participation within a 3 to 4 week period. To respect the voluntary aspect of this research process and to demonstrate confidentiality of the process to the targeted population, neither current senior students nor alumni would receive individual second requests for participation. Only a single general reminder was resent to all targeted subjects.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Berg (2001), Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011), Punch (2005), and Sieber (1998) address the need for all researchers to “anticipate the ethical issues that could arise during their studies” (as cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 92). During this process, researchers need to take additional steps to guard their participants; gain their trust; encourage ethical research practice; protect against misconduct that could reflect on their institutions; and manage new, difficult problems that may arise (Israel & Hay, 2006). Before the study was conducted, a formal review of the research proposal was conducted through Pepperdine University’s Institutional Review Board (Appendix B) and the Institutional Review Board of the target university (Appendix C). The Review Board works specifically to ensure that the proposed research does not violate human rights and

protects the welfare of all participants. The study met criteria for Exempt research status as participation poses no more than minimal risk to the all-adult population being studied.

The study targets undergraduate seniors and recent graduates of the institution, all who are at least 18 years of age. During the survey, participants were only asked to share their perceptions regarding workplace readiness and the role their institution played in the career preparation process. This was to alleviate any concerns participants may have had regarding their personal results being shared with current administration and that this could in turn have affected their status or view in the eyes of the institution. All participants had anonymity of response, as the electronic survey tool did not capture IP addresses. All data was handled with the utmost care and any responses including personally identifying information was stripped from the data prior to analysis & stored to protect against any possible breach in procedures. Individual responses from the data will not be shared, and only themes found across all responses will be shared with administrators of the institution.

To avoid any potential ethical issues, the researchers assured the anonymity of participants and provided a clear purpose for the research being conducted. Informed consent was presented to participants, reminding them that their personal information would be protected and that deception would not be used during the process of the study. To further minimize the risk of a data breach and the exposure of those participating, the informed consent was used strictly as a method for informing the participant prior to accessing the survey.

The invitation and informed consent included the following points:

- The purpose of this study is to understand student/recent graduate perceptions of workplace readiness and the role that the institution had in student/recent graduate career preparation.

- The length of time needed to complete the survey should take no more than 30 minutes.
- Participation in this study is voluntary and is of minimal risk to the participant. One's choice to participate will be known only to the participants themselves, as the survey will collect no identifying information.
- The results of this survey are meant to inform the institution regarding students' viewpoints towards workplace readiness such that future programming and academic decisions can further support the student body and prepare them for the workplace.
- The researcher and research institution will carefully maintain the anonymity of all participants. Survey responses will be saved securely for a minimum of five years.
- Contact information will be provided to all participants in the event that there are any questions or concerns regarding the research or survey process.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Quantitative data was downloaded from Qualtrics into Excel where the data was organized and prepared for analysis. Descriptive analyses including frequency distributions were conducted to obtain a general understanding of the data.

Qualitative data was downloaded from Qualtrics into text files, and then uploaded into the textual analysis software program *HyperRESEARCH*. Qualitative software programs help researchers organize, sort, and search for information in text or image databases (Creswell, 2009). The open-ended responses were coded for specific key words that identified with the research questions for the study. From the first two reviews of data, a codebook was generated with clear definitions of the terms. Codes will emerge during the data analysis and be created for any term or idea that is deemed vital to the research (Creswell, 2009). Once the data was reviewed multiple times, the researcher reflected upon the overall meaning of participant

responses. Attitude and tone of participants were identified, while patterns or themes amongst the responses were also addressed. Interpretations of the findings, according to Lincoln & Guba (1985), will be “initiated by asking what lessons were learned from the data such that the essence of the idea can be captured” (as cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 200). Results from the interpretation of the responses were represented using figures, tables, and further discussion of the findings. To ensure reliability of the codebook and response transcripts, an experienced researcher was asked to review the coding process. Once complete and process discussed, modifications were made based upon the suggestions of the experienced researcher until both researchers agreed that the coding was done accurately.

**Integration of quantitative & qualitative findings.** Each target group’s responses were analyzed separately for each type of data. The two sets of finding were compared to each other to explore possible differences based on whether the individual had already entered the job market as an alumnus. Both quantitative and qualitative findings for each group were integrated in order to arrive at study conclusions.

### **Study Validity**

According to Gray, “when considering the value of a study, plausibility and credibility must be taken into account” (Gray, 2009, Loc. 7861). The researcher for this study works closely with student professional development and is knowledgeable of workplace readiness within higher education. Since the researcher is passionate about supporting students and equipping them appropriately for life outside of college, there is no bias. Ultimately, the researcher is seeking to understand the perceptions of current undergraduate seniors and recent graduates regarding workplace readiness and what role their institution played in the process. While much research has focused on employers’ perceptions of the workplace readiness of higher education

students, the researcher's professional experience and time within the literature has led the researcher to believe that the student's perception of their workplace readiness in relation to the preparation provided by their institution has not been focused on appropriately. Because there is a gap in the research regarding students' perception of their career preparation and institutional provided career development, this study is needed. The researcher plans to use the findings to inform higher education institutions about the mindset of current students and recent graduates regarding their experiences and needs when preparing to enter the workplace and utilize the results to assist institutions in the development of workplace readiness programming.

The researcher used reflexivity during the full research process to ensure that the findings gathered from the data analysis phase were accurate. The researcher reviewed data and text files multiple times and confirmed that the coding was correct based on the qualitative data provided. The use of research software to aid in the analysis process was another tool used to ensure accuracy. Finally, the researcher enlisted the aid of a peer examiner in the Career Services and Dean's Office who has experience as a researcher to ensure validity was maintained.

### **Presentation of Findings and Study Conclusions**

Quantitative data collected during the study are represented using figures, tables, and further discussion of the findings. Qualitative findings are presented thematically and shared in a narrative format with rich descriptions. Each theme is addressed individually and supported with direct quotes from the data collected. Ideas and lessons learned through this study are shared in detail during Chapters 4 and 5. Implications for higher education institutions are discussed along with recommendations for future studies. It is the researchers hope that the results will inspire ideas for new programming and ways in which higher education institutions can support the career development of their students.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this embedded mixed methods study was to explore undergraduates' and recent graduates' understanding of what it means to be workplace ready and how their experience in a higher education institution did or did not assist them in developing these necessary skills. The study included the gathering of data from questions of both a quantitative and qualitative nature on an online survey. The online survey contained two sections: a section containing demographic and institutional-specific background questions as well as a section containing items regarding university workforce development and preparation. The central guiding research question and sub-questions being answered were as follows:

Central Guiding Research Question:

- What are undergraduate students' and recent graduates' perceptions of the quality of career preparation provided by their institution?

Sub questions:

1. What skills do undergraduate seniors and recent graduates define as being workplace-readiness skills?
2. What skills do undergraduate seniors and recent graduates perceive as being most important to secure a degree-appropriate job?
3. What university-offered resources would assist undergraduate students in developing workplace-readiness skills that are not currently offered?
4. What activities do students perceive as most valuable in preparing them for the world of work?

This chapter presents the findings for each of the two samples: 212 undergraduate seniors and 42 first-year alumni. These findings are organized by sample group and include demographic description, quantitative findings of preferences and experiences with the

university followed with a thematic analysis of the responses to open-ended survey items.

Undergraduate participant responses are presented first, followed by the alumni responses and ending with a brief summary of the research findings.

### Undergraduate Senior Findings

A convenience sampling approach was utilized to gather the undergraduate senior participants for this study. To qualify as a candidate for this study, participants were required to be undergraduate seniors meeting requirements for graduation in May 2016. The 2016 undergraduate senior class, consisting of 776 students, was invited to participate in the research study via an invitation sent to their university email account. The survey data was collected in April 2016, two weeks before graduation. Of the initial 776 undergraduate seniors who received the recruitment email, 213 provided survey responses. Within the undergraduate survey, not all participants responded to all the items. The discussion of the findings will indicate the exact number of responses for each survey question.

**Undergraduate Senior sample demographics.** Of the undergraduate seniors, at least 205 out of the 213 respondents provided an answer to the two demographic items. As Figure 5 expresses, females represented 73% of the participants ( $n = 151$ ) while males consisted of 27% ( $n = 56$ ; Figure 5).

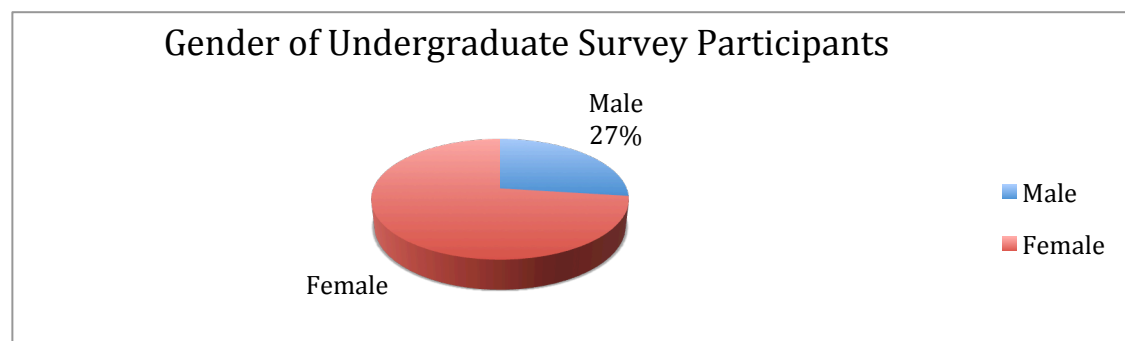
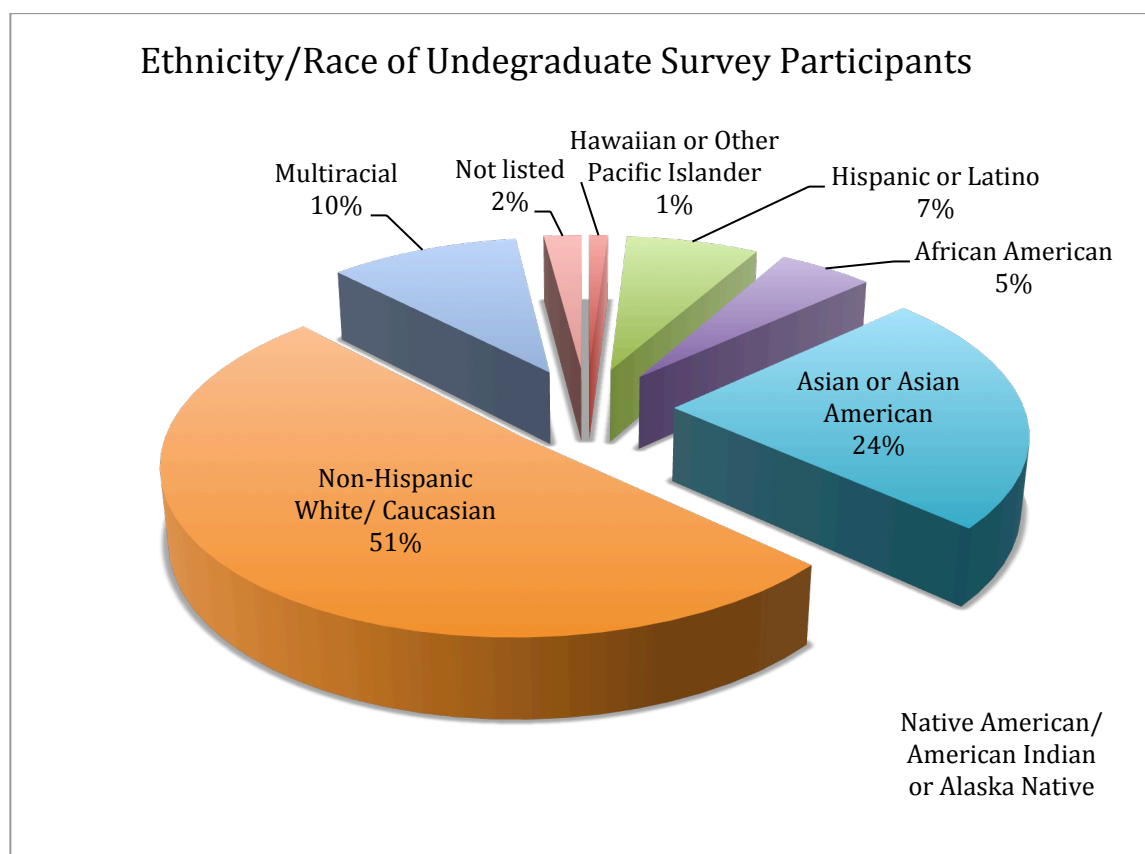


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of gender for undergraduate survey participants ( $N = 207$ ).



Half of the undergraduate senior population identified themselves as being of Caucasian or Non-Hispanic White origin (50%;  $n = 103$ ). Twenty-three percent ( $n = 48$ ) are Asian or Asian American and 10% ( $n = 23$ ) identify as being multiracial. Seven percent ( $n = 15$ ) of respondents are Hispanic or Latino, 5% ( $n = 11$ ) are African American, and 2% ( $n = 4$ ) are of an ethnicity not provided within the selection list. Finally, 1% ( $n = 3$ ) participants are of the Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander origin (Figure 6).



*Figure 6.* Frequency distribution of ethnicity/race for undergraduate survey participants ( $N = 205$ ). The diverse sample of students who provided responses to the undergraduate senior survey, account for 27% ( $n = 213$ ) of the target population ( $N = 776$ ).

### **Undergraduate Senior Quantitative Findings**

Within the undergraduate senior survey, nine survey items requested participants to select from pre-established responses. Item analyses were conducted using the data from the

“Undergraduate Seniors” (USP), who participated in the survey ( $N = 213$ ). The nine quantitative survey items can be grouped into the following four themes: Experiential Learning, Career Preparation and Development Services, Workplace Readiness, and Degree Value. Each theme with related survey items are presented.

**Experiential learning.** Undergraduate seniors were asked, “Did you hold any form of employment during your time as a student at the University?” Nine options for responses were provided including: (a) on-campus student employment, (b) off-campus student employment, (c) community service, (d) internships, (e) research assistant, (f) teaching assistant, (g) resident advisor/spiritual life advisor, (h) student organization leader, and (i) other. Two hundred two USP responded to this question and selected all experiential learning opportunities they participated in during their time as a student. A majority of the USP (80%;  $n = 161$ ) reported serving as on-campus student employees, with just over half (58%;  $n = 117$ ) of respondents also participating in internships. Off-campus student employment (43%;  $n = 87$ ), student organization leader (19%;  $n = 38$ ), and community service (17%;  $n = 35$ ) served as the next most popular forms of employment for participants. Research assistant, teaching assistant, and resident advisor/spiritual life advisor roles showed less active involvement with 15% or less ( $n \leq 30$ ) participating. Individuals who selected “Other,” were requested to disclose what other forms of employment they engaged in during their time as a student. Upon review of the twenty-two narrative responses, the researcher identified that twenty of the responses given could be grouped within the pre-set responses and are reflected in the findings presented (Figure 7). The other two narrative responses provided can be characterized as forms of self-employment.

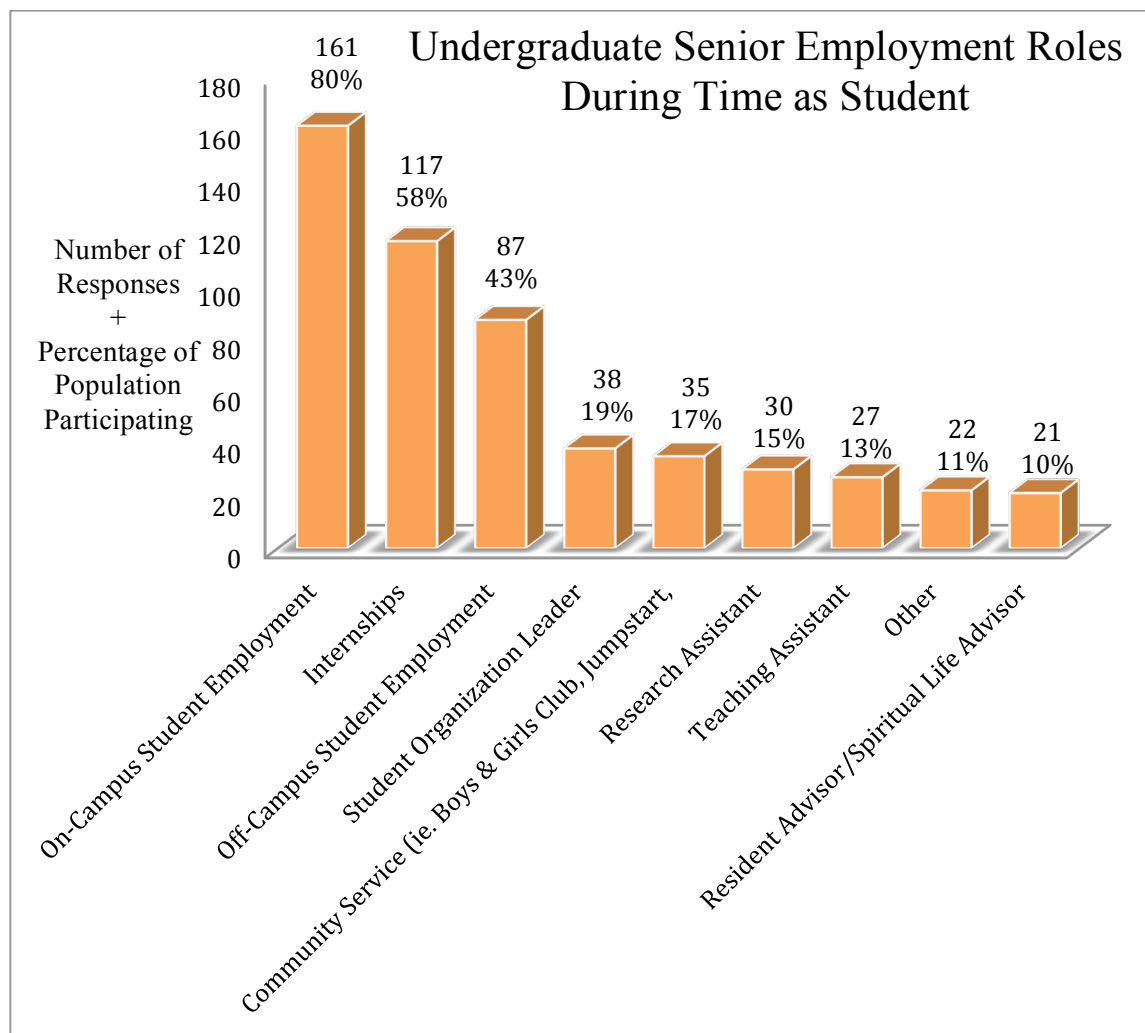


Figure 7. Frequency distribution of USP employment roles during time as students ( $N = 202$ ).

**Career preparation and development services.** Three survey items focused on USP participation in career development during their time as a student and their perceptions regarding the value of career preparation programs and services offered by the university. To further understand the value that USP attribute to career preparation programs or services, one survey item asks, “Do you believe that it is important for undergraduate students to utilize career preparation programs or services provided by the institution?” Of the 195 undergraduate seniors who responded to the survey item, 88% ( $n = 172$ ) believe it is important for undergraduate

students to engage in the university-provided career preparation programs or services, while 12% do not believe it is important ( $n = 23$ ; Figure 8).

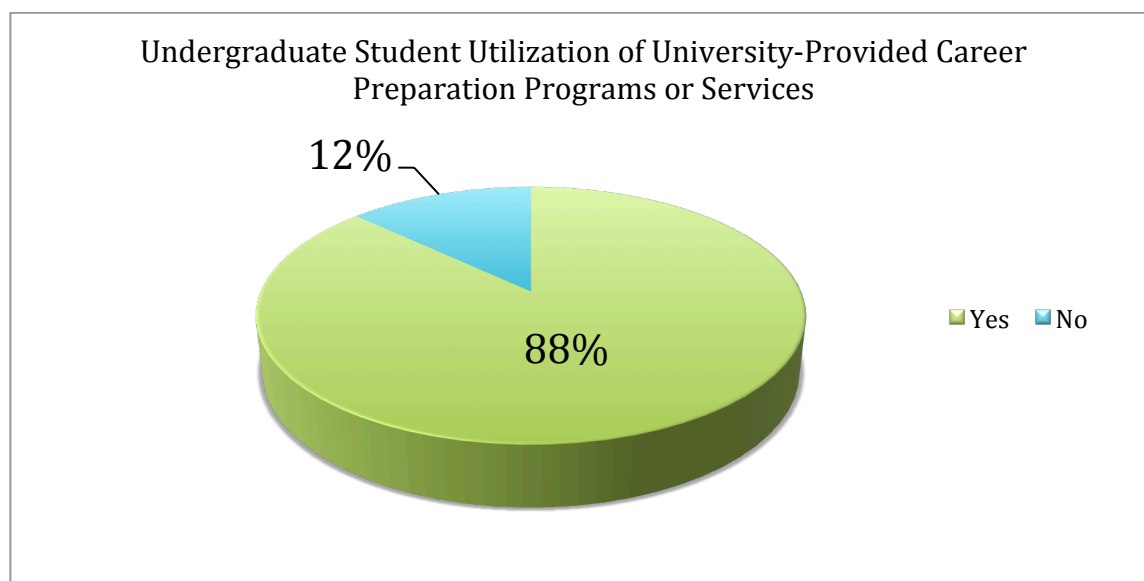


Figure 8. Frequency distribution of undergraduate senior perceptions regarding the importance of undergraduate student utilization of university-provided career preparation programs or services ( $N = 195$ ).

In an effort to better understand the undergraduate senior perspective regarding engagement in career preparation programming, participants were asked to reflect on their time as a student and select the statement that best describes their personal level of interest in pursuing institutionally-provided career development opportunities for workplace preparation (Table 1). The majority of respondents (37%;  $n = 67$ ) stated that they were both interested in career development opportunities and had taken action by engaging in these experiences when relevant. Forty-seven of the respondents (26%), stated that they were interested in the opportunities but felt that the programs or services did not apply to them. The selection of this response implies that the opportunities offered were targeted towards a specific age group, degree program, or industry that was not relevant to the respondent. Twenty four percent ( $n = 43$ ) of participants stated that they were interested in the opportunities provided and had planned to take action but did not follow through. Only 24 respondents (13%) showed disinterest in institutional-provided career

development opportunities, indicating that overall, respondents felt the opportunities were of value and relevant to them as developing professionals.

Table 1

*Frequency of Interest Level in Pursuing Institutionally Provided Career Development Opportunities (N = 181)*

During your time as a student, select the response that best describes your level of interest in pursuing institutionally provided career development opportunities for workplace preparation?		
Responses	Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
I was interested and did take action	67	37%
I was interested but the opportunities did not apply to me	47	26%
I was interested and had planned to take action but did not follow through	43	24%
I was not interested in pursuing institutional-provided career development opportunities	24	13%
<i>Total</i>	<i>181</i>	

Finally, USP were asked to identify all institutionally provided career preparation services they utilized personally while enrolled as a student (Table 2 and Table 3). If a service or program was not listed, respondents were asked to select, "Other" and write-in the specific programming. A total of 13 answers were provided to select from, with one response being for those who chose not to participate in any programming. One hundred ninety five undergraduate seniors responded to this survey item. Table 2 highlights a breakdown of the number of career preparation services selected by each survey participant. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they participated in only one ( $n = 34$ ; 17%) or two ( $n = 38$ ; 19%) career preparation services. Additionally, 33 undergraduate seniors (17%) shared that they chose to not participate in any university-provided career preparation programming. Thirty-one undergraduate seniors (16%)

participated in three services, while the rest of the survey respondents ( $n = 50$ ; 26%) participated in 4 or more career preparation services during their time as a student.

Table 2

*Frequency of Undergraduate Senior Participation in Select Number of Institutionally Provided Career Preparation Services (N = 195)*

Which of the following institutionally provided career preparation services did you utilize during your time as a student at the University? (Select all that apply)		
Number of Career Preparation Services Selected	Frequency of Population	Percentage of Total Population
One Service	34	17%
Two Services	38	19%
Three Services	31	16%
Four Services	20	10%
Five Services	13	7%
Six Services	6	3%
Seven Services	4	2%
Eight Services	3	2%
Nine Services	0	0%
Ten Services	3	2%
Eleven Services	0	0%
Twelve Services	0	0%
No Services	33	17%
Total	195	

Table 3 showcases the frequency of undergraduate seniors who participated in each of the career preparation services. The majority of undergraduate seniors worked with a Career Ambassador to have their resume and cover letter reviewed (56%;  $n = 110$ ). A large portion of undergraduate senior respondents also met with an Industry Specialist for Career Counseling or Job and Internship searches (37%;  $n = 73$ ). While most career development opportunities are offered by the Career Center, 36% ( $n = 70$ ) of undergraduate senior respondents engaged in career

conversations with faculty during their time as a student. Having a career conversation with a mentor (26%;  $n = 50$ ) and participating in a Career Fair (26%;  $n = 50$ ) were also popular services engaged in by respondents. At least one undergraduate senior respondent ( $N = 135$ ) participated in each of the eleven identified, university-provided career development programs and services.

Table 3

*Frequency of Undergraduate Senior Participation in Institutionally Provided Career Preparation Services (N = 195)*

Which of the following institutionally provided career preparation services did you utilize during your time as a student at the University? (Select all that apply)		
Response	Frequency of Students Who Participated in Selected Service	Percentage of Population Who Participated in Selected Service
Resume Review with Career Ambassador	110	56%
Career Counseling/Job & Internship Appointment with Industry Specialist	73	37%
Career Conversation with Faculty	70	36%
Career Fair Participant	50	26%
Career Conversation with Mentor	50	26%
On-Campus Information Session Participant	40	21%
I did not participate or use any institutional-provided career preparation services	33	17%
On Campus Interview Participant	24	12%
Mock Interview Participant	22	11%
Career Week Sessions Participant	13	7%
Career Coaching Program Participant	11	6%
Project Externship Participant	8	4%
Other	5	3%

Four respondents selected “Other,” when indicating which services they had participated in.

Those who made this selection were asked to explain what other institutional provided services or career preparation programs that they had participated in. The responses given could all be grouped within the pre-set responses, and these answers indicate that the student utilized this

item as an opportunity to provide a more thoroughly detailed description of a program they participated in. Table 2 above reflects the narrative responses within the frequency count to ensure the answers were documented appropriately. Thirty-three survey participants selected the response, “I did not participate or use any institutional-provided career preparation services.” To gain further insight into their response, participants were asked to provide an explanation for their lack of engagement with career preparation services. Twenty-seven of the thirty-three respondents provided a narrative response, which will be discussed later with the undergraduate survey qualitative findings.

**Workplace readiness.** Three survey items were written with the purpose of understanding students’ perceptions of workplace readiness and the role that the university should play in the development of these skills. Undergraduate senior participants were asked, “Do you believe that the university should play a role in preparing students for the workplace?” Ninety seven percent ( $n = 166$ ) agreed that the university should play a role in helping students ready themselves for the workforce. Only 1 undergraduate senior indicated that they *did not believe* the university should play this role, while 5 other undergraduate seniors shared that they were *not sure*. The overwhelming majority of respondents sharing that they believe the university should play a role in the workplace is not surprising with many entering into higher education institutions for the purpose of ultimately securing gainful employment upon graduation.

Another survey item asked first-year alumni to identify which of the two categories of skills they believe employers value most in their new hires. A definition of hard skills and soft skills was provided for survey participants. Hard skills are described as an individual’s professional or technical skills that are tangible, while soft skills can refer to an individual's



interpersonal skills, ability to communicate, ability to collaborate, and practice patience. Of the 174 undergraduate senior responses, 76% ( $n=133$ ) believe that employers look for new hires with strong soft skills, while 24% ( $n=41$ ) believe hard skills are most valuable. This response indicates that participants feel employers are less focused on an applicant's technical skills, which can be taught, and instead are focused on finding individuals with soft skills that are not tangible.

While the specific workplace readiness skills desired in new hires varies amongst employer, the literature points towards a common theme and skill set. To address this idea, participants were asked to endorse how well they believe the university prepared them in 14 areas including: (a) Oral Communication, (b) Written Communication, (c) Teamwork/Collaboration/Working with Others, (d) Problem Solving, (e) Initiative, (f) Knowledge within Major, (g) Technical Skills/Computer Skills, (h) Professionalism, (i) Work Ethic, (j) Critical Thinking, (k) Responsibility, (l) Project Management, (m) Customer Service, and (n) Adaptability. For each area, participants were asked to select between four responses: *not prepared*, *somewhat prepared*, *adequately prepared*, and *well prepared* (Table 4). Responses were scored from 0 to 3 respectively with not prepared receiving 0 points and well prepared receiving 3 points. The mean ratings for each area of workplace readiness were averaged and reported in Figure 9.

Table 4

*Rating Frequencies of USP Preparation by University Related to Workplace Readiness (N = 172)*

As a soon-to-be graduate, your perception of workplace readiness is valuable. During your time as a student at the University, to what extent do you feel that you have been prepared in the following areas?					
Using the drop-down menu provided, please identify your level of preparedness for each workplace readiness skill.					
Workplace Readiness Skills	Not Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Adequately Prepared	Well Prepared	Total Responses
Work Ethic	1	11	33	127	172
Responsibility	2	8	38	122	170
Teamwork/Collaboration/ Working with Others	3	6	46	117	172
Written Communication	1	13	52	106	172
Critical Thinking	1	8	61	101	171
Problem Solving	2	12	57	101	172
Adaptability	3	9	61	97	170
Professionalism	2	13	59	98	172
Oral Communication	1	21	60	90	172
Knowledge within Major	3	22	64	83	172
Initiative	4	30	53	85	172
Project Management	6	32	53	79	170
Customer Service	15	34	47	74	170
Technical Skills/Computer Skills	14	56	64	38	172

The mean ratings for undergraduate senior perceived preparation for all workplace readiness skills fall towards the middle and upper three-quarters of the scale (between 1.51 and 2.66), indicating that overall, USP feel that the university has adequately prepared them in the various areas of workplace readiness. Undergraduate seniors seem to feel much more prepared in certain areas of workplace readiness than others. According to the data, USP feel *well prepared* ( $mean > 2.5$ ) in the areas of *Teamwork/Collaboration*, *Critical Thinking*, *Responsibility*, *Work Ethic* and *Written Communication*. Undergraduate seniors also indicated that they feel *adequately prepared* ( $1.50 < mean < 2.49$ ) in nine out of the fourteen workplace readiness

competencies. With mean ratings ranging from 1.51 to 2.49, undergraduate seniors indicate that the university has taken steps to prepare and support them in the development of workplace readiness skills. Of all 14 workplace readiness competencies, USP reported feeling the least prepared in the area of *technical skills or computer skills*. With a mean of 1.51, the data indicates that undergraduate seniors were the least confident in this area.

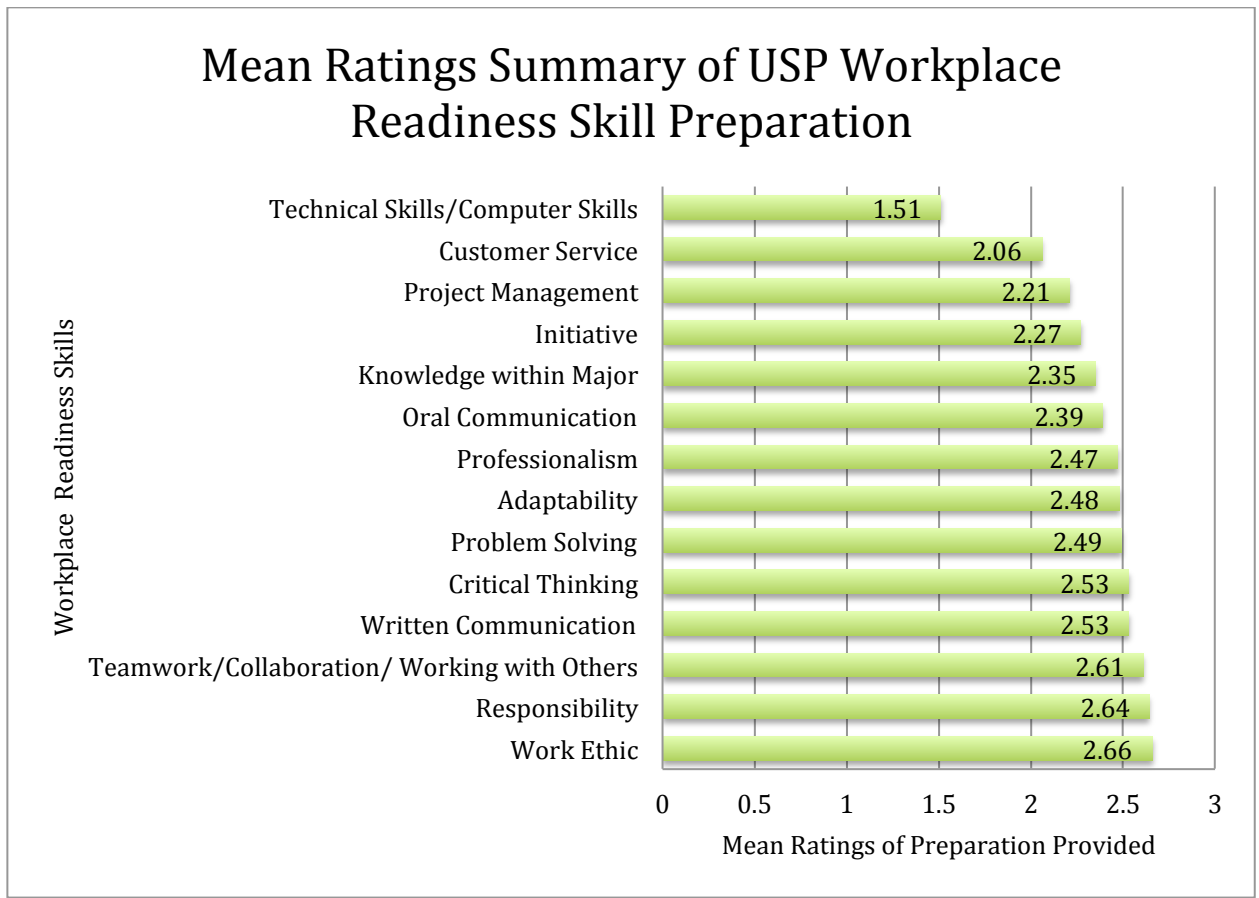
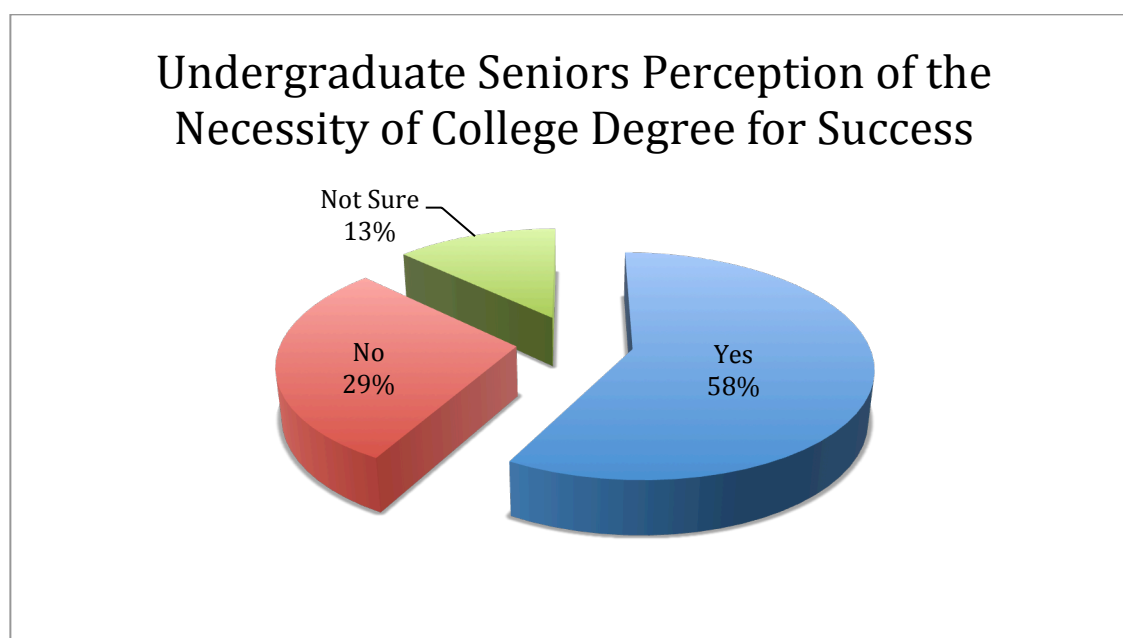


Figure 9. Mean ratings summary of USP workplace readiness preparation by university (N = 172). Though the mean ratings offer a summary comparison of undergraduate senior perceived workplace readiness preparation provided by the university, Table 4 offers a more detailed view of the frequency with which undergraduate seniors selected the ratings for each workplace readiness competency.

**Degree value.** Two survey items sought to gain undergraduate senior perceptions regarding the value of their degree. With many students graduating with thousands of dollars in student loans each year, it is important to determine whether students feel their degree is truly worth its monetary value. To begin, undergraduate seniors were asked, “Do you believe that obtaining a college degree is necessary to be successful in today’s society?” Of the 173 total respondents, 58% ( $n = 100$ ) felt that earning a college degree is necessary in order to be successful in today’s society. Twenty-nine percent ( $n = 50$ ) shared that they did not feel a college degree is needed to be successful today and thirteen percent stated they were unsure (Figure 10).



*Figure 10.* Undergraduate Seniors perception of the necessity of college degree for success ( $N = 173$ ).

Finally, undergraduate seniors were asked to consider, “To what extent has your college education prepared you for the next step in your career?” USP were given a range of four options from *Not Prepared* to *Well Prepared*. Out of the one hundred sixty nine respondents, forty-eight respondents (28%) feel *well prepared*, while 43 respondents (25%) feel *somewhat prepared*. The greatest number of undergraduate senior respondents feel *adequately prepared* (45%;  $n = 76$ ) and

two respondents felt *not prepared* for their next career move. Figure 11 shows a graphic representation of alumni perceptions of their preparedness for the next step in their career.

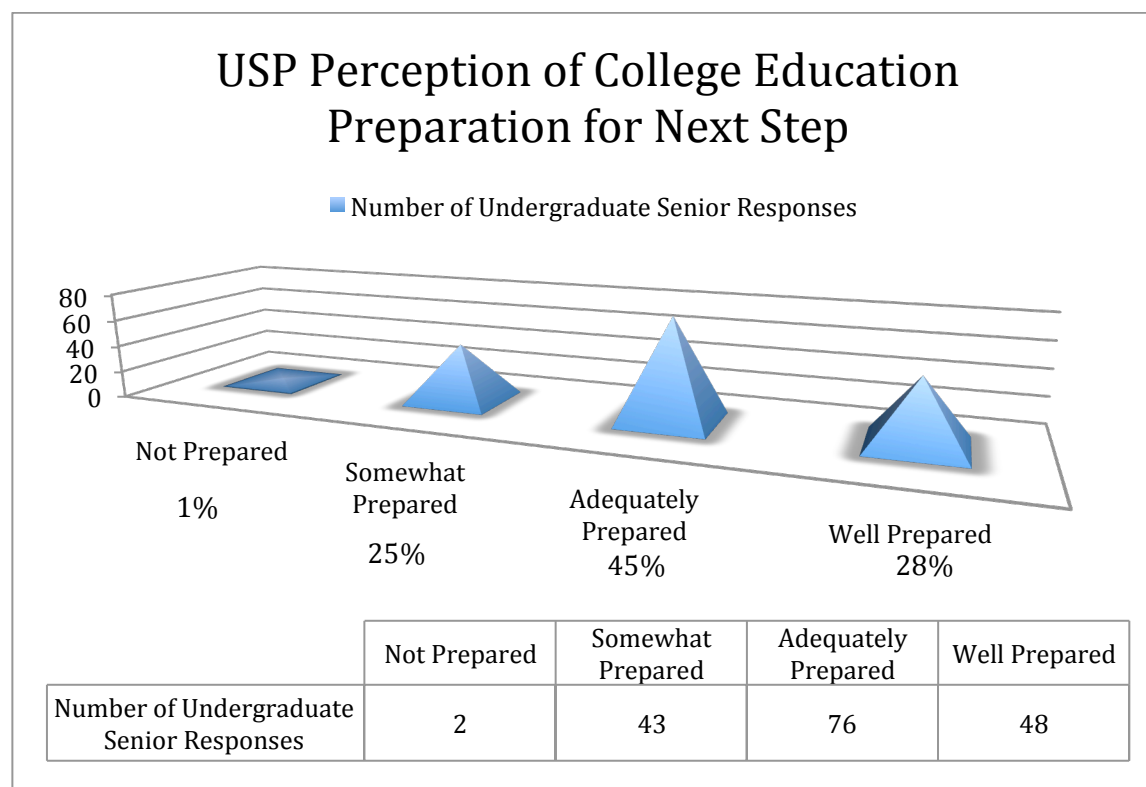


Figure 11. USP perception of college education preparedness for next step ( $N = 169$ ).

### Undergraduate Senior Qualitative Findings

Undergraduate seniors responded to 11 open-ended survey items that allowed participants to share their thoughts and views regarding workplace readiness and the institution's role in their career development, as well as requested further explanation for their response to earlier survey items. The eleven survey items produced a total of 1,907 coded passages which were further categorized into the following seven themes: (a) perception of degree value, (b) perception of employability needs and concerns, (c) expectations for university-offered career preparation resources, (d) expected roles in workplace preparation, (e) perception of new hire skills desired by employers, (f) university career preparation participation and experience, and (g) university courses that support workplace preparation. Within each theme, subthemes were identified. A

few of the themes have common subthemes. The identified themes and related subthemes are represented below in Tables 5-11, in addition to the inclusion of respondent quotes.

**Theme 1: Perception of degree value.** Within the survey, respondents were asked to describe why they believe that obtaining a college degree is necessary to be successful in today's society. Through the responses provided, five subthemes regarding undergraduate seniors' perception of the value of a college degree emerged: (a) definition of success, (b) dependence upon individual/field of study, (c) establish candidate credibility, (d) necessary factor for employment/success, and (e) not necessary for employment/success. These five subthemes were utilized 154 times when coding participant responses. Table 5 lists the theme and subthemes.

Table 5

*USP Perception of Degree Value*

Themes	Subthemes
Perception of Degree Value	Definition of Success Dependence upon Individual/Field of Study Establish Candidate Credibility Necessary Factor for Employment/Success Not Necessary for Employment/Success

**Definition of success.** When asked to reflect upon whether or not a college degree is necessary to be successful in today's society, many respondents offered differing definitions of what they perceive as being successful. One undergraduate senior shared:

“I know many people today who are happy, working, and starting their families all without having a college degree. If they're happy and productive, I consider that successful.”

Another participant stated:

Unfortunately, I do not believe society has the correct view of success. The successful of today's society are often not well rounded or particularly knowledgeable of fields outside their own. The successful are now those that are rich, not those that are happy or wise.

Ten respondents provided their differing views regarding the definition of success. Of these coded passages, a common idea was woven among the opinions presented and is highlighted within the following quote from a survey participant:

“Success is dependent upon the views of the individual and their goals.”

***Dependence upon individual/field of study.*** Seventeen coded passages point to several undergraduate seniors’ perspective that the value of a college degree is dependent upon the goals of the individual and their intended field of study. Two undergraduate seniors shared:

“It depends on what the individual wants to do.”

“I think it depends on when and where you are trying to participate in today’s society.”

Several survey respondents made the point that not all industries are reliant on their employees holding college degrees, though they all agreed that having one is helpful.

***Establish candidate credibility.*** Many undergraduate seniors indicated that the power of a college degree is in its ability to establish a candidate’s credibility and make them more competitive/valuable. Fifteen passages were coded to highlight this idea that a college degree sets one apart from those that do not hold this credential.

“Having a college degree is definitely helpful and shows employers that you have invested in yourself...”

A few respondents pointed to the college degree as a representation that they have developed critical thinking and other valuable workplace skills.

“Having a college degree represents one can succeed in a rigorous environment and it develops important critical thinking skills (via exposure to different people, backgrounds, difficulties, etc.)”

“A college degree represents another 4 years of critical thinking skills, training, and contacts/connections that is invaluable in the workplace.”

***Necessary factor for employment/success.*** Seventy-two of the one hundred sixty eight responses were coded to reflect undergraduate seniors’ perception that holding a college degree is a necessary factor for employment or success. Comments from respondents include, “...most jobs require at least a Bachelor’s degree to apply,” and “Getting an undergrad degree is the equivalent to getting a high school diploma fifty years ago.” Reviewing the majority of the responses, one finds that participants firmly believe that without a degree, one would encounter difficulty in pursuing their career of choice. One respondent sums up this idea when they state, “Obtaining a college degree is a ‘norm’ for our generation, and is the safest route to a career.”

***Not necessary factor for employment/success.*** When reviewing responses, 40 passages were coded to highlight several respondents’ views that having a college degree is not a necessary factor for employment or success. While a few participants pointed to famous celebrities including Steve Jobs and Bill Gates as proof that success does not depend upon a degree, others emphasized roles where this credential is not necessary. One participant stated:

“Other people I know are successful in various fields without getting a college degree. Electricians, beauticians, and more don't need a degree. A college degree is only necessary for fields that require one.”

Another shared:

“I could've easily jumped into a sales position for the last 4 years and that experience would've been more valuable than a college kid with no experience.”

Though a majority of respondents, attributed their response to knowing others or having read stories of those who have been successful sans degree, one student offered a different perspective on higher education and the role that a degree plays in securing employment or being successful.



I sometimes feel as though higher education can act as a scapegoat for young adults who are afraid to make their transition into the real world. Considering the ever-developing existence of the Internet, universities are losing their monopoly on knowledge.

As this response points to a changing tide in education, another undergraduate senior pointed out the notion that while a college degree is not necessary to be successful, it does help make the journey easier. The student states:

“Becoming successful when you have a college degree is like a shooting a free throw while becoming successful without a degree is like shooting a 3 pointer. Both are possible, but one is harder than the other to accomplish.”

**Theme 2: Perception of employability needs and concerns.** Undergraduate seniors were asked the following questions; (a) “What concerns do you have, if any, about being prepared for the workplace?”; (b) “How has your college education prepared you for the next step in your career?”; and (c) “What was your level of interest in pursuing career development opportunities during your time as a student?” These questions served as the foundation for the majority of the 153 coded passages relating to this theme, though some of the subthemes were utilized for student responses in relation to other survey items. Within this theme, six subthemes were created: (a) advanced/alternative degree, (b) other, (c) prepared/no concerns, (d) prior experience, (e) securing employment, (f) unprepared/unqualified for entry into the workforce and resulted in coded passages (Table 6).

Table 6

*USP Perception of Employability Needs and Concerns*

Themes	Subthemes
Perception of Employability Needs and Concerns	Advanced/Alternative Degree Other Prepared/No Concerns Prior Experience Securing Employment Unprepared/Unqualified for Entry into Workforce

**Advanced/alternative degree.** When responding to survey items related to their feelings about entry into the workforce, many undergraduate students shared that their industry of choice requires that they earn an advanced degree. One participant shared how their college experience helped prepare them for the next step in their career by stating:

“It has inspired a love of learning and so I will be continuing my education in graduate school.”

Another student stated:

“I have learned a lot, and I am going to graduate school for my career, so I think I have been well prepared.”

While the majority of the 16 coded passages are similar in nature to the comments above, one respondent shared their concern regarding not having enough technical skills but added an addendum of hope that this would change by stating:

“...I need to get other certifications for what I want to do anyway.”

**Other.** The transition from college to the workplace can be difficult for many students when faced with the enormous task of finding a job, especially one that is within their desired industry. Two students cite their concern that they will not be able to find this ideal role when they state:

“My main concern is that the "fit" is right for me. I want to feel comfortable and happy at work, so that's my biggest concern.”

“I'm afraid I'll be really bored but I have to stay in the job for a source of money.”

Of the nine coded passages, one respondent voiced their concern regarding the current state of education by sharing, “There is also growing criticism that the current education norms are no longer preparing kids for critical thinking and independent thought but rather programming us to pass tests and simply get a job.” Ultimately, this subtheme serves as a unique placeholder for thoughts and ideas that are significant to the overall theme.

***Prepared/no concerns.*** When concerning one’s employability, feeling prepared and equipped to enter into the workforce is a mentality and state of mind sought by most if not all. Several undergraduate seniors indicated that their experiences up until now, have resulted in their feeling fully prepared for entry into the workplace. Of the 155 coded statements provided when asked if they have any personal concerns about entering the workplace, 51 of these responses indicated that participants felt prepared and had no concerns. One undergraduate senior simply stated, “No concerns.” During the survey, being prepared and having no concerns was also identified as way of defining what it means to be workplace ready. One participant stated that you can define workplace readiness as, “Being prepared to enter the workplace as a competent worker.” Another participant responded that workplace readiness is, “The extent to which an individual is prepared to enter the professional workforce upon graduation from college.”

***Prior experience.*** Many of the undergraduate senior survey participants believe that in order to secure employment, one must have ample prior experience to be considered as a viable candidate. Eight survey participants shared the fears that they personally lacked the proper experience to be considered for jobs upon graduation. One student stated:

“I believe that I will be qualified for jobs, but I think companies will overlook me because of lack of internship experience.”

Another student feared that their academic coursework “...didn’t give me the experience that employers are looking for.” When asked what they believe employers are looking for in their new hires, nine respondents highlighted, “Experience,” as one of the top 3 skills.

**Securing employment.** For many undergraduate seniors, one of their greatest concerns prior to graduation is their search for employment and securing themselves a position in a career that is reflective of their personal goals. When relating their personal concerns, twelve respondents cited their nerves regarding securing employment. One participant stated:

“I don't really have any concerns besides finding the right job for me with a workplace that I can thrive in.”

Another participant shared their disappointment and frustration with the job search process when they shared:

“I'm ready for a job, but I don't have one. I've applied for over 15 jobs and heard back from probably 8 (no's), one maybe and a lot of nothings.”

**Unprepared/unqualified for entry into workforce.** Undergraduate senior survey respondents felt that despite their college education, they might still be unprepared or unqualified for entry into the workforce in their desired industry. Two noted:

“I just feel under qualified for a full time job at this point.”

“I am worried that it won't be what I expected and that I am not ready for the specific field I am going in to.”

**Theme 3: Expectations for university-offered career preparation resources.** Within the undergraduate senior survey, respondents were asked several different questions relating to their experience with the university-provided career preparation resources. Whether the questions were directly addressing the efficacy of these programs or if they were asking students

to discuss their career development during their time as a student, many participants provided responses that highlighted their expectations for this type of programming. Responses to eight out of the eleven narrative survey items resulted in 183 coded passages highlighting the theme. The following theme of Expectations for University-Offered Career Preparation Resources with seven subthemes emerged: (a) continuing education support/pre-employment preparation, (b) diversity in programming, (c) experiential learning, (d) networking, (e) professional/staff faculty, (f) relevant coursework, (g) technical skill building (Table 7).

Table 7

*USP Expectations for University-Offered Career Preparation Resources*

Themes	Subthemes
Expectations for University-Offered Career Preparation Resources	Continuing Education Support/Pre-Employment Preparation Diversity in Programming Experiential Learning Networking Professional/Staff Faculty Relevant Coursework Technical Skill Building

***Continuing education support/pre-employment preparation.*** Within one of the survey items, respondents were asked to share what preparation programs, services, or opportunities do they wish the University had offered to help prepare them for the workplace. Of the 132 responses given to the question, nineteen different participants cited their wish for continuing education support or more advanced pre-employment preparation. Several participants shared their desire to have better access to employers, internship opportunities and information on preparing for graduate school. One student noted:

“It would have been nice to have had more opportunities my freshman year to learn about graduate school, the application process, and what to do in general to prepare myself.”

Another student shared their desire to have, “Internship finders and help figuring out what field I would fit the most,” while another promoted, “Mandatory career counseling.”

***Diversity in programming.*** One of the greatest frustrations pointed out by undergraduate seniors is the lack of diversity amongst university career preparation programming. Many students shared that the wealth of opportunities were geared toward business students, while other departments and divisions were given less access to employers and programs related to their industry. Twenty-two codes were used to highlight these concerns and suggestions for diversity in programming. Four participants cited their wish for greater exposure to their diverse industries:

“More science/medical related career/grad school fairs. It seems as if most career prep is tailored to business students.”

“More social work related career talks. This was never an option at career fairs.”

“More outlets pertaining to a career in music.”

“More jobs related to sports medicine, especially actually decent paying jobs that are challenging rather than extremely low-level positions.”

In addition to the desire for more diversity in the targeted population of choice for programming, students also shared a desire to see programs related to one’s personal development and growth.

Two students shared:

“A class on etiquette would be nice...”

There also needs to be a HUGE improvement, especially at our Christian University, in how much exposure the students have to different cultures, ideas, religions, and types of people. Ignorance leads to hate, and it breaks my heart to see it in action.

***Experiential learning.*** In addition to diversity in the programming offered to students for career preparation, undergraduate seniors also offered suggestions and a desire for experiential learning and opportunities to gain experience outside of the classroom. One respondent shared a

desire for more, “Volunteer Work,” while another stated that they were interested in, “shadowing programs.” Many of the responses all shared a common idea of providing greater access for health students to real clinical opportunities within their industry.

**Networking.** When sharing concerns related to entering the workplace, several students indicated that they were worried about not having the right connections or ability to network with other working professionals. As a result, several survey respondents voiced their wish for the university to offer greater access to alumni and employers within their desired industries. One student stated that they wanted, “Stronger partnerships with companies that students can make a career with.” Another student shared the importance of helping students build their networks and connect with major employers when by stating:

Bring in excellent companies or alumni, such as Goldman Sachs, A.T. Kearney, Deloitte, etc. ... Companies tend to hire people they see. They don’t tend to just hire from online applications. Do something that brings the great companies to the University.

**Professional staff/faculty.** The faculty and staff within a university play a vital role in the student experience. As such, many undergraduate seniors shared how valuable these individuals are in their development as individuals and future professionals. Some students chose to seek out faculty members rather than the Career Services office. One student stated their reasoning behind this choice was because:

“Most of the opportunities were about heading into the workplace immediately. Very few were about continuing in academia. For this I sought advice from professors at The University.”

Another student gave credit to their department for its effort in assisting students.

“The accounting department does the best job at facilitating professional opportunities for its students.”

One student cited both their professors and professional staff as having helped assist them throughout their time as a student.

College and career services helped me get my resume ready, and prepare for interviews. Also professors' office hours were very helpful. Tech central in the library helped me with my technology issues as well. These three things really stand out to me.

I think The University does a good job of this - the professors take interest and guide and the university itself offers many opportunities to provide help where it is needed, but allows for the student to choose which help and how much they receive.

**Relevant coursework.** Some respondents suggested the adoption of courses or programs within their department, which focuses solely on preparing students for the workplace and life beyond college. Two noted:

“I wish the business division offered a course or program that could help us explore different fields within business so that we grow interest in a specific area.”

“More real life based classes.”

Several students cited a wish for more variety in the classes offered, less required General Education classes, and more options to take classes that build new knowledge. One student stated:

I think the real question is whether the University should require less, specifically when it comes general education requirements... I'm all about gaining a broad education, but I'm the kind of person who prefers to do his own learning, so many of the GE coursework I had to take was a repetitive waste of time that crowded out opportunities to learn something new.

**Technical skill building:** Survey participants were asked to expand upon what they believe the university role should be in the preparation of students for the workplace. A few students pointed out their belief that the university should take an active role in ensuring that the curriculum allows for students to build the technical skills necessary to be successful in the workplace. Two students shared:

“I believe that while we learn Critical-thinking skills in school, we are not taught valuable skills as to how to be successful in the workplace and to live independently.”



“We should expand the curriculum to include more forays into critical thinking, logic, argumentation, and innovative opportunities, while also doing the typical resume workshops and job fairs.”

Several students were interested in the opportunity to take classes that focused on building the life skills necessary to become a successful and independent adult as well as the skills needed to advocate for one’s self in the workplace. One student stated:

“I would love to have a program that taught about financial independence, including but not limited to: investments, insurance, how to do your taxes, how to purchase and rent property, credit, etc.”

Another student shared:

I wish I had been prepared in knowing how to value myself and my work in the workplace. Especially as a female, I would like to know how to ask for a reasonable wage and know when and how to ask for raises and know when and how to set boundaries.

**Theme 4: Expected roles in workplace preparation.** Two survey items asked undergraduate seniors to identify the role that they believe students should play in their preparation for the workplace, as well as the role universities should play in students’ preparation for the workplace. The theme of Expected Roles in Workplace Preparation resulted in 274 coded passages with the following four subthemes: (a) identity-personal development, (b) knowledge-building, (c) real world/workplace preparation and experience, and (d) self-preparation (Table 8).

Table 8

*USP Expected Roles in Workplace Preparation*

Themes	Subthemes
Expected Roles in Workplace Preparation	Identity-Personal Development Knowledge-Building Real World/Workplace Preparation and Experience Self-Preparation

**Identity-personal development.** Several undergraduate seniors shared their feelings regarding their role in preparing himself or herself for the workplace or a career. Many of the respondents stated that part of their role includes personal development or finding their identity as an individual and workplace professional. Two students stated:

“I need to be bettering myself on the inside, as well as being ambitious with internships, jobs and opportunities to prove that I can a capable person.”

“I feel that seeking opportunities that bring you out of your comfort zone and help you to grow personally is the role of the student.”

Additionally, a few participants described the role that the university should play in this process.

One student stated:

“I believe that college is not only a place of academic learning, but of personal and professional development.”

**Knowledge-building.** Some undergraduate seniors pointed to higher education as a hall of higher learning and not an institution that should be responsible for the professional training of students for careers. One student stated that their role in the workplace preparation involves, “committing my time to learning.” Another student stated:

My role is to be as much of a sponge as possible and to absorb all of the information I can so that there isn't a gap between my knowledge and the generations' above me. At 22, I have much to learn before I can make my mark in the world.

Several students defended the right of the university to focus solely on providing an education to their students. Two students shared the following:

“It is not the role of a university to train workers. It is the role of a university to EDUCATE its students.”

“I think the services should be offered but a university's job is to educate and not necessarily professional development.”

**Real world/workplace preparation and experience.** Many undergraduate seniors cite college as being a time where countless opportunities are offered for students to further develop

their skills and gain professional experience. Several seniors stated that they believe it is their job to ensure that they are preparing themselves for life beyond college and the workplace by engaging in internships and employment opportunities that will help them to develop the necessary skills to be successful. One student states:

“I believe that students should take advantage of the opportunities offered at school that are related to their future, and to think more about the future and the industry they want to get into.”

Another student echoed a similar notion when they stated what their role involves:

***Finding jobs or internships that prepare you for the real world outside of the classroom.*** Of the 141 coded passages regarding whether students believe the university should play a role in student workplace preparation, 91 coded passages were in agreement that the university has a duty to help support its students in their career development. When asked to further explain their reasoning, one student summed up the feelings that were echoed by many when they stated:

College is for many the last step of education before the workplace, the first step of working, or even the first step before that if they have not had a job before college. Colleges should pride themselves in readying their graduates for work, as students come to college to learn. Education is not as effective if you don't know how to apply it.

***Self-preparation.*** Many undergraduate seniors perceive it is solely their responsibility for ensuring that they are prepared for entry into the workplace. Of the 162 coded passages regarding students' role in workplace preparation, 67 of these coded passages represented students believe that self-preparation is key. This involves every step of the journey, from taking the initiative to seek out resources to ensuring that they are taking control of their future. Two students noted the following:

The student that comes out of school unprepared for the workplace when ample opportunities to prepare prevented themselves is irresponsible and chose not to take control of their life in the ways that they could. The failure to prepare is preparing to fail.

“My role as a student is to be devoted and to learn beyond the walls of the classroom. In fact, many of my best skills were things I taught myself outside of school, and then was able to apply in school.”

**Theme 5: Perception of new hire skills desired by employers.** As society’s and industry’s needs continue to evolve, one of the biggest questions that many students and prospective employees have is, “What are the top 3 skills that are desired by employers?” Upon responding to this survey item and other items relating to defining workplace readiness, the theme of “Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers,” was established with the following 8 subthemes: (a) adaptability/creative, (b) communication, (c) confidence/self-efficacy, (d) critical thinker, (e) knowledge/technical skill, (f) leadership qualities, (g) professionalism/work ethic, and (h) ability to be taught. The above theme resulted in 703 total coded passages (Table 9).

Table 9

*USP Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers*

Themes	Subthemes
Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers	Adaptability/Creative Communication Confidence/Self-Efficacy Critical Thinker Knowledge/Technical Skill Leadership Qualities Professionalism/Work Ethic Ability to be Taught

**Adaptability/creative.** Several students cite the ability to adapt to a changing work environment and the contribution of creative, original ideas to invent something new as being a highly sought after skill. Of the 170 responses, 52 survey participants responded that “Adaptability” or “Creativity,” should be one of the top skills desired by employers. Other

students perceived, adaptability and being innovative as key to defining workplace readiness.

One student defined workplace readiness as, “Being able to adapt to different situations utilizing a variety of acquired skills.” Another defined workplace readiness as the, “Ability to think openly, realistically, and adaptively to new experiences and real-life situations as new responsibilities are taken on.”

**Communication.** Several undergraduate seniors identified having strong oral and written communication skills as being a highly desired skill for employers. Forty-eight respondents stated that they believed employers are looking for new hires with strong “communication skills,” or “interpersonal skills.” One student even included communication within their definition of workplace readiness by stating it involves, “being able to converse in an appropriate manner.”

**Confidence/self-efficacy.** Many survey participants believe that employers are seeking candidates who are confident in themselves and their abilities, while also having a strong desire to succeed in their work. Several students identified that having “confidence,” “purpose,” and “ambition” as being vital skills for being a competitive candidate for employment. Multiple undergraduate seniors also incorporated these terms into their definition of workplace readiness.

Two students noted:

“Someone who is able to enter a work environment with the humility to learn and the confidence that comes from knowing one's ability to uniquely contribute to the betterment of their community.”

“Being confident in myself to go in and maybe not knowing everything the job is about but knowing I am capable of learning and adapting to the environment.”

**Critical thinker.** Having the ability to use one’s judgment and reasoning when devising solutions to solve problems is a skill that many believe is necessary to be successful. A few students shared their perspective that to be workplace ready, one must have critical thinking

skills. One student stated that being workplace ready means that the individual is, “Ready to solve problems in a professional environment.” Many of the participants cited “critical thinking skills,” and “problem solving skills,” as being in employers’ top three lists of desired employment skills.

**Knowledge/technical skill.** Though the technical skills vary based upon the industry or position, many undergraduate seniors believe that having industry-specific knowledge and a varied technical skill set is necessary for employment. When sharing the skills that they believe employers are looking for in new employees, many survey participants pointed to specific technical skill or knowledge, including “Microsoft Office,” “Emailing Software,” and “Adobe Suite.” Other survey participants pointed to having general knowledge of the industry and technology competence. One student stated that employers are looking for prospective employees who have “an understanding and possession of the skills required to be successful at that specific job.”

**Leadership qualities.** When considering the qualities that make a good leader, students identified the following characteristics as being indicative of this trait: (a) honesty, (b) personable, (c) responsible, and (d) dependable. All of the above characteristics were named by undergraduate seniors as skills that could set prospective employees apart from other candidates. One student described “likeability” and “accountability” as the following:

“Likeability (will we fit with their company), accountability (hard-working, and can they rely on us)...”

**Professionalism/work ethic.** When first entering into the workforce, many undergraduate students believe that professionalism and having a strong work ethic are two skills, which are necessary for all roles or positions. From being timely, to teamwork, to showing dedication to one’s job, all of these traits are linked to this subtheme. Out of the 170 responses, 136 survey

participants identified professionalism and work ethic traits as being desired by employers. Two students noted that employers were looking for the following:

“...dedication to being successful at the job.”

“...ability to work on a team/get along with people.”

***Ability to be taught.*** Several undergraduate seniors shared that desirable candidates are those who are always willing to learn and are open to being taught. One student stated that employers are looking for those who are, “willing to learn,” or who are “willing to grow.” Other students also included this trait within their definition of workplace readiness. One student shared that employers should be looking for the following:

“A positive willingness to learn and grow oneself in whatever ways necessary for the task(s) at hand.”

Another student echoed a similar sentiment while also pointing out the ideal candidate:

“Someone who is able to enter a work environment with the humility to learn.”

**Theme 6: University career preparation participation and experience.** When responding to seven of the open-ended survey items, many survey participants shared their reasoning for participating or not participating in university-offered career preparation programs and services. In addition, many also shared about their personal experiences with these programs and services, which lead to the creation of the theme, University Career Preparation Participation and Experience. Across the seven survey items, the researcher coded 260 passages related to this theme or the corresponding subthemes: (a) actively engaged in university programming, (b) conflict in schedule/time management, (c) disconnect between university and employers, (d) dissatisfaction with university programming and support, (e) effective university-offered programming, (f) positive influence on college experience, and (g) student initiative (Table 10).

Table 10

*USP University Career Preparation Participation and Experience*

Themes	Subthemes
University Career Preparation Participation and Experience	Actively Engaged in University Programming Conflict in Schedule/Time Management Disconnect between University and Employers Dissatisfaction with University Programming and Support Effective University-Offered Programming Positive Influence on College Experience Student Initiative

***Actively engaged in university programming.*** When asked their level of participation with university-provided career preparation programming, several students indicated that they actively engaged in these opportunities when offered. One student stated:

“I have appreciated opportunities to review my resume, to receive career counseling and advice, and to put myself out there with career fairs.”

***Conflict in schedule/time management.*** For some undergraduate seniors, participation in university-provided career preparation programs was not always possible due to conflicting class schedules or a lack of time due to other commitments. Two students shared their difficulty in participating:

“I just had so much on my plate all the time from classes, work, and extracurriculars that I wasn't able to take advantage of these opportunities.”

“Most of the events conflicted with my class or work schedule.”

***Disconnect between university and employers.*** Many survey participants shared suggestions for increasing student participation in career development programming through the establishment of better relationships between the University and employers. Several participants felt that the skills and information being taught by the University do not fully align with the



needs and wants of employers in the workplace. One student described their concern regarding the transferability of the skills being taught when he states:

“I know the ancient art history of Egypt but I don't know how to work all the ins and outs of excel (a valuable tool in all jobs).”

Another student addressed the disconnect directly when they stated:

“Most employers view students as over experienced and under qualified. If the university played a larger role in preparing us for the workplace, employers might change their view of graduates.”

***Dissatisfaction with university programming and support.*** While relating their experiences with the courses, services, and career development programming provided by the University, many students shared their dissatisfaction with the quality of programming and support provided. When asked how well college has prepared them for the next step in their career, one student stated:

I don't know how to file taxes. I don't know what particular things recruiters are looking for in regards to specific positions, and yet I've had so much information forced into me about western culture. Which is more relevant? You tell me.

Dissatisfaction was expressed the most when survey participants were asked to share why they did or did not engage in career development opportunities provided by the University. Several grievances were voiced regarding the support provided by career services. Two students noted:

“None of the resources really felt relevant or helpful. I've also been told that the Career Center gives terrible advice so I was hesitant on actually getting any career help from them.”

“The career center had nothing for me and were too controlling.”

Other students indicated feeling like the programs and services offered were not worth their time.

One student stated:

I felt like a number of opportunities were oriented towards majors who were gearing to go into business or non-profits. As a psychology major, I would have appreciated more

clinically/medically focused businesses, with an emphasis on the treatment side, rather than admin/business.

Another student echoed a similar sentiment when they stated:

I have not seen or felt that there are good resources for sports medicine majors besides those who want to be doctors. I feel that the university and the natural science division have a singular focus on doctoral work and tend to ignore other avenues in the medical field.

A few students voiced frustration and dissatisfaction with the level of support offered by

University faculty and staff. One student noted:

“I thought that some of what The University had to offer could be valuable, but I was so disgusted by the treatment that I received that I wouldn't use any of it.”

Another student echoed this frustration when they shared their experience in reaching out for help:

“I attempted to contact the career center for help, but was never given assistance. I felt that I could do better on my own.”

***Effective university-offered programming.*** For many students, their experience with University-offered programming has been successful and effective. Some students shared their appreciation for the opportunities provided to them regarding career development and support.

Two students noted:

“I think the services and programs provided far exceeded my expectations of support.”

“I think The University has prepared me very well, so I don't think any more opportunities are needed. Students should take ownership of their development.”

***Positive influence on college experience.*** While sharing about their career development journey during college, a few students spoke specifically to situations or individuals that have had a positive influence on their college experience. One student stated, “I have gone to the career center for my internship, which has been an incredibly eye opening experience and I have learned so much.” Another student stated, “My career advisor has been very resourceful.”

***Student initiative.*** Many survey participants indicated that their level of participation in career preparation programs and services is a direct reflection of their personal initiative to engage with these resources. While some students took the initiative to be actively involved in their career development during college, others chose an alternative route. When looking at visiting the Career Services department, one student stated, "I was so busy and unfamiliar with the protocol and the offices that I never took advantage." Another student stated, "Having a major that did not require me to look for internships earlier on in my college career, I found it hard to find myself taking the opportunities to pursue institutionally provided career development." Other students took the initiative to take advantage of the opportunities provided. One student stated, "I have been prepared to have a job before graduation, and have worked hard to make this happen."

**Theme 7: University courses that support workplace preparation.** To gauge a better understanding of students' perception of workplace preparation provided by the institution, survey participants were asked to share what specific courses were the most beneficial to their personal career development. One hundred forty seven undergraduate seniors provided responses to this survey item, which resulted in 175 coded passages indicating a specific class or classes that were the most valuable. The question above resulted in the production of the following theme and eight subthemes: (a) Business Administration, (b) Communications, (c) Fine Arts/Religion/Philosophy/Social Science, (d) Humanities and Teacher Education, (e) Natural Science, (f) No Unique Courses, (g) Seminar, (h) Service Learning (Table 11).

Table 11

*USP University Courses that Support Workplace Preparation*

Themes	Subthemes
University Courses that Support Workplace Preparation	Business Administration Communications Fine Arts/Religion/Philosophy/Social Science Humanities and Teacher Education Natural Science No Unique Courses Seminar Service Learning

***Business Administration.*** Many survey respondents shared a memorable experience within a Business Administration course. Over 10 unique courses were listed by survey respondents. One student shared his appreciation of his Organizational Behaviors and Management classes by stating the following:

“Organizational Behaviors and Management classes. The professor is great at preparing students and mentoring students. Coming from a background in the business brings broad and deep insights. The class content is inspiring and makes students think.”

***Communications.*** The majority of survey respondents who identified a Communications course as being valuable to their workplace readiness pointed specifically to their public speaking course as the most influential. One student explained their choice by stating, “Public speaking because it gave me the confidence to speak in front of my peers and lessened my anxiety associated with it.”

***Fine Arts/Religion/Philosophy/Social Science.*** Though not as popular amongst survey respondents, some students were greatly influenced by courses within the Fine Arts, Religion and Philosophy, and Social Science departments. The most notable courses as dictated by survey

participants include, “Religion 102,” “Motor Learning and Coordination,” and “Technical Theater.” One student noted:

“Religions of the World-- this class will make it so much easier to love and understand people from many different backgrounds and beliefs, and makes it possible to respect them.”

**Humanities and Teacher Education.** Several survey participants pointed to courses within the Humanities and Teacher Education department as being influential in their career development. One Education major cited their education courses as providing them with direct experience in teaching, while another student selected HUM 313 because, “HUM 313: put into perspective almost everything we're seeing in the world today (socially, politically, etc.) and has helped me understand opinions of others much more different than me.” One student wittingly described the reasoning for their choice in Social Psychology by stating:

“Social Psychology-- from knowing how to make friends out of enemies to saving people's lives, this class should absolutely be a requirement.”

**Natural Science.** Many undergraduate seniors specified Natural Science courses as being influential in their career development because these courses focus specifically on developing technical skills and encouraged stronger work ethics. One student shared, “SPME 460 and 440. The professor taught the courses in an extremely life like, real world setting. Everything he taught was applicable to my future occupation and he stressed how to treat people with respect. The courses were intended to not only teach the required material but also stressed the importance of people skill and personal interaction in the workplace.”

**No unique courses.** Rather than specifying a class or group of classes, several survey respondents described the courses that were beneficial based upon specific traits or skills that were developed during the experience. Two students noted:

Any class that teaches about society as a whole, has helped me the most as it has taught me more about cultural and social-class differences, which helps to better communicate and understand individuals that have backgrounds dissimilar to my own.

Due to my major, I have a fairly long list. The common thread through them all though are the classes that have taught me to think critically, understand how to conduct myself professionally and explain my ideas well, how to discuss and disagree civilly, how to problem solve, and classes that were very demanding, but from which I learned a lot. These are skills that are very transferable and necessary to work well in the workplace.

**Seminar.** Many survey participants identified seminar and capstone courses as equipping them with the skills and tools needed to be successful. One student shared, “My capstone as it gave me an idea of what the industry would be like. And graphic design as it taught me a hard skill.” Another student pointed to their capstone class by stating, “We actually took the time to do things such as apply to jobs, go over cover letters & resumes as well as lots of discussion about what it looks like after college.”

**Service learning.** Several undergraduate seniors cited the inspiration they received through their participation in service learning courses. These courses are established by professors with the intention of showing how subject matter can be applied to real world situations. One student shared:

“The business class of Service Leadership and Policy because they incorporated working with people, real life applicable skills, and challenged me in terms of difficulty and workload.”

Another student echoed a similar idea when they stated:

Without a doubt, my business capstone classes, Service Leadership and Policy, prepared me most for the workplace. These classes implemented teamwork within a group for the entire semester more than any of group project I have done before. Service taught us how to work with clients. Policy taught us how to do extensive research and analysis.

The next section addresses the first-year alumni population and their responses provided.

## First-Year Alumni Findings

A convenience sampling approach was utilized to gather the first-year alumni participants for this study. To qualify as a candidate for this study, individuals must have records that show they graduated from the university in May 2015. The 2016 first-year alumni consisting of 616 individuals were invited to participate in the research study via an invitation sent to the current email address available on file. Survey responses were collected between May and June 2016. Of the initial 616 first-year alumni who received the recruitment email, 42 responded to the survey. Within the alumni survey, not all participants responded to all items. The discussion of the findings indicates the exact number of responses for each survey question.

First-year Alumni sample demographics. Of the first-year alumni, all but one of the 42 survey respondents responded to the requested demographic items. The first-year alumni earned degrees in a wide range of majors and their gender distribution was 63% females ( $n = 26$ ) and 37% ( $n = 15$ ) males (Figure 12).

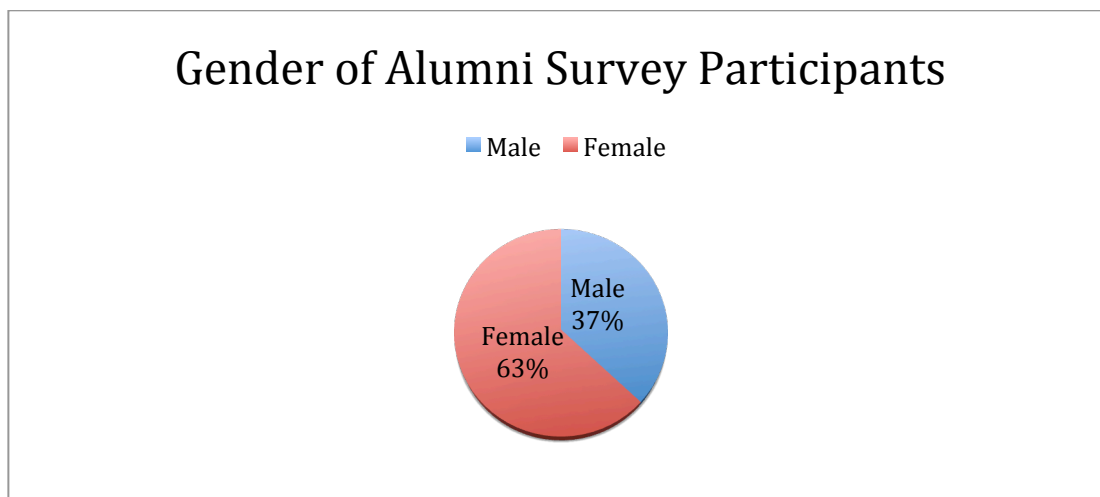


Figure 12. Frequency distribution of gender for alumni survey participants ( $N = 41$ ).

Almost half of the participants identified as being Non-Hispanic White or Caucasian (42%;  $n = 17$ ), 22% ( $n = 9$ ) are Asian or Asian American, and 17% ( $n = 7$ ) are Hispanic or Latino. The same percentage of participants identifies as African American and Multiracial (8%;  $n = 3$ )

respectively and only one respondent's ethnic background could not be identified based on the list provided to choose from (Figure 13). Thirty-nine out of forty-two participants listed their major as an undergraduate. The target institution offers 44 undergraduate majors which are divided amongst eight academic divisions: Business Administration, Communication, Fine Arts, Humanities and Teacher Education, International Studies and Languages, Natural Science, Religion and Philosophy, and Social Science. Over 1/3 of first-year alumni participants (36%;  $n = 14$ ) majored in a Social Science degree program. The next largest percentage (18%;  $n = 7$ ) majored in a Natural Science degree program. All academic divisions had at least one participant major in one of their programs (Table 12).

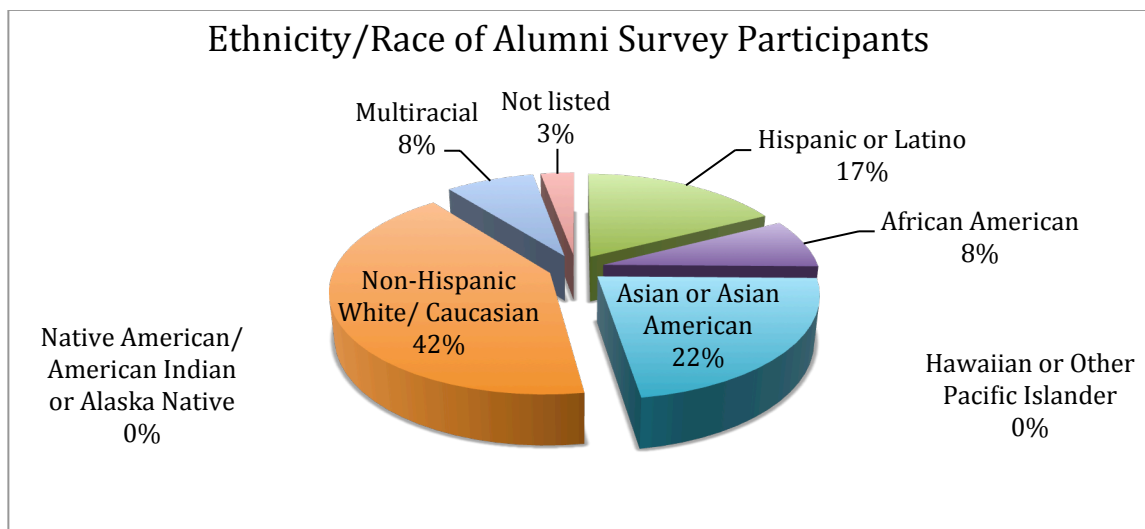


Figure 13. Frequency distribution of ethnicity/race for alumni survey participants ( $N = 39$ ).



Table 12

*First-Year Alumni Majors Frequency Distribution*

Department	Major	Frequency
Business Administration	Business Administration (3)	3
Communication	Public Relations (1)      Advertising (1) Integrated Marketing      Organizational Communications (1)      Communication (1)	4
Fine Arts	Theatre (1)      Music (1)	2
Humanities and Teacher Education	History (1)      Liberal Arts (1) Film Studies (1)	3
International Studies and Languages	International Relations (2)      Hispanic Studies (1) International Studies (2)	5
Natural Sciences	Chemistry (3)      Mathematics (1) Biology (1)      Computer Science (1) Sports Medicine (1)	7
Religion and Philosophy	Philosophy (1)	1
Social Science	Psychology (4)      Political Science (5) Economics (3)      Industrial and Sociology (1)      Organizational Psychology (1)	14
<b>Total Respondents:</b>		<b>39</b>

When asked whether they are currently employed in a role that is associated with their degree program or major, 32% of first-year alumni shared that their current employment is directly related ( $n = 11$ ). Twenty-nine percent of participants are employed in a role that is somewhat related to their degree program or major while another 29% are employed in a role that is not related to their educational background ( $n = 10$ ). Three participants (8.8%) identified as being currently unemployed (Figure 14). When asked to describe their current employment situation, all three participants indicated that they are currently enrolled in graduate school and not seeking employment at this time (Table 13).

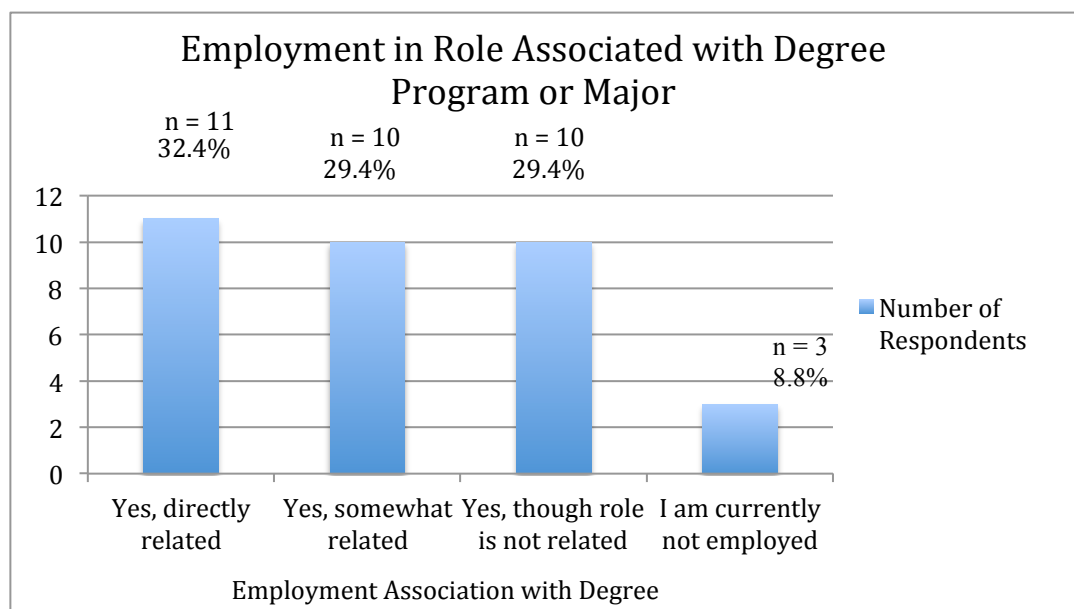


Figure 14. Frequency distribution of employment association with degree program or major (N = 34).

Table 13

First Year Alumni Reason for Employment Status (N = 3)

Reason for Employment Status	Number of Responses	% of Total
Enrolled in Graduate School	3	100%
Actively seeking employment within my industry	0	0%
Actively seeking any type of employment	0	0%
Not seeking employment	0	0%
Other	0	0%

### First-year Alumni Quantitative Findings

Nine quantitative survey items covered four areas: Experiential Learning, Career Preparation and Development Services, Workplace Readiness, and Degree Value. Each area is presented below and includes a visual representation of the data.

**Experiential learning.** FYA were asked, “Did you hold any form of employment during your time as a student at The University?” Nine options for responses were provided including:

(a) on-campus student employment, (b) off-campus student employment, (c) community service, (d) internships, (e) research assistant, (f) teaching assistant, (g) resident advisor/spiritual life advisor, (h) student organization leader, and (i) other. Thirty-three FYA responded to this question and selected all experiential learning opportunities they participated in during their time as a student. A majority of the FYA (76%;  $n = 25$ ) reported serving as on-campus student employees, with slightly over half (55%;  $n = 18$ ) of respondents also participating in internships. Off-campus student employment (48%;  $n = 16$ ), student organization leader (39%;  $n = 13$ ), and community service (36%;  $n = 12$ ) served as the next most popular forms of employment for participants. Research assistant, teaching assistant, and resident advisor/spiritual life advisor roles showed less active involvement with less than 20% ( $n < 7$ ) participating. Individuals who selected “Other,” were requested to disclose what other forms of employment they engaged in during their time as a student. Upon review of the two narrative responses, the researcher identified that the responses given could be grouped within the pre-set responses and are reflected in the findings presented (Figure 15). The figure also represents the percentage of the FYA survey respondents who participated in each type of employment.

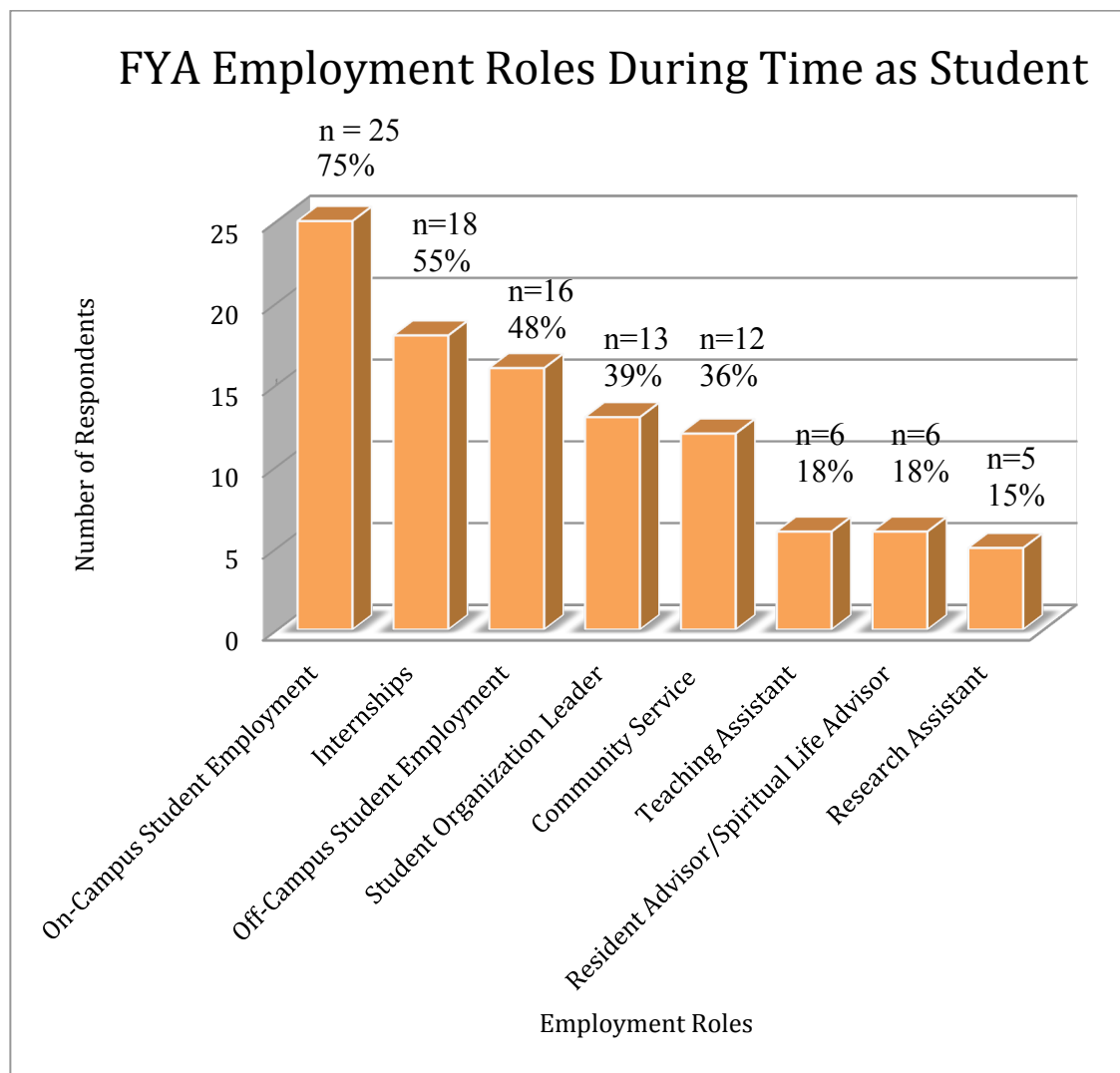


Figure 15. Frequency distribution of FYA employment roles during time as student ( $N = 33$ ).

**Career preparation and development services.** Three survey items explored FYA participation in career development during their time as a student and their perceptions of the value of career preparation programs and services offered by the university. To further understand the value that FYA attribute to career preparation programs or services, one survey item asks, “Do you believe that it is important for undergraduate students to utilize career preparation programs or services provided by the institution?” Of the 30 first-year alumni who responded to the survey item, 87% ( $n=26$ ) believe it is important for undergraduate students to

engage in the university-provided career preparation programs or services, while 13% do not believe it is important ( $n = 4$ ; Figure 16).

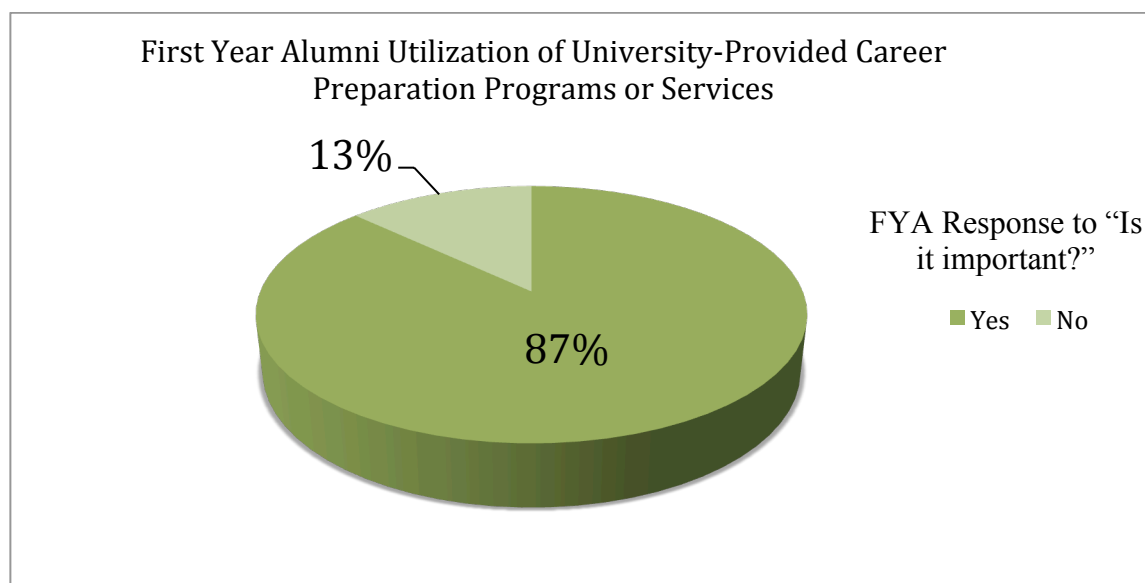


Figure 16. Frequency distribution of FYA perceptions regarding importance of undergraduate student utilization of university-provided career preparation programs or services ( $N = 30$ ).

In an effort to better understand the student perspective regarding engagement in career preparation programming, participants were asked to reflect on their time as a student and select the statement that best describes their personal level of interest in pursuing institutionally-provided career development opportunities for workplace preparation (Table 14). The majority of respondents (42%;  $n = 13$ ) stated that they were both interested in career development opportunities and had taken action by engaging in these experiences when relevant. Eleven of the respondents (35%), stated that they were interested in the opportunities but felt that the programs or services did not apply to them. This implies that the opportunities offered were targeted towards a specific age group, degree program, or industry that did not relate to the respondent. Nineteen percent ( $n = 6$ ) of participants stated that they were interested in the opportunities provided and had planned to take action but did not follow through. Only 1 respondent (3%) showed disinterest in institutional-provided career development opportunities, indicating that

overall, respondents felt the opportunities were of value and relevant to them as developing professionals.

Table 14

*Frequency of First-Year Alumni Interest Level in Pursuing Institutionally-Provided Career Development Opportunities (N=31)*

Reflecting back to your time as a student, select the response that best described your level of interest in pursuing institutionally-provided career development opportunities for workplace preparation?		
Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage of FYA Population
I was interested and did take action	13	42%
I was interested but the opportunities did not apply to me	11	35%
I was interested and had planned to take action but do not follow through	6	19%
I was not interested in pursuing institutional-provided career development opportunities	1	3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>31</i>	

Finally, FYA were asked to identify all institutionally-provided career preparation services they utilized during their time as a student, with many respondents selecting more than one service (Table 15 and Table 16). If a service or program was not listed, respondents were asked to select, "Other" and write-in the specific programming. A total of 13 answers were provided to select from, with one response being for those who chose not to participate in any programming. Thirty-three first year alumni responded to this survey item. Table 15 highlights a breakdown of the number of career preparation services selected by each survey participant. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they participated in two ( $n = 11$ ; 33%) career preparation services. Twenty-two percent of FYA respondents ( $n = 7$ ) shared that they chose to not participate in any university-provided career preparation programming. Additionally, 6 first-year alumni (18%) engaged in the use of four services. Three first-year alumni (9%) participated in

three services. The rest of the survey respondents ( $n = 6$ ; 18%) participated in only one service or five or more career preparation services during their time as a student.

Table 15

*Number of Institutionally Provided Career Preparation Services Participated in by First Year Alumni (N = 33)*

Which of the following institutionally provided career preparation services did you utilize during your time as a student at the University? (Select all that apply)		
Number of Career Preparation Services Selected	Frequency of Population	Percentage of Total Population
One Service	2	6%
Two Services	11	33%
Three Services	3	9%
Four Services	6	18%
Five Services	1	3%
Six Services	1	3%
Seven Services	2	6%
Eight Services	0	0%
Nine Services	0	0%
Ten Services	0	0%
Eleven Services	0	0%
Twelve Services	0	0%
No Services	7	22%
Total	33	

Table 16 highlights how many first-year alumni survey participants engaged in each university-offered career preparation program or service. While the majority of career development opportunities are offered by the Career Center, 55% ( $n = 18$ ) of first-year alumni respondents engaged in career conversations with faculty during their time as a student. Having one's resume reviewed by a Career Ambassador (55%;  $n = 18$ ) and participating in a Career Fair (30%;  $n = 10$ ) are also popular services engaged in by respondents. At least one first-year

alumnus respondent ( $N = 33$ ) participated in each of the eleven identified, university-provided career development programs and services.

Table 16

*Frequency of First-Year Alumni Participation in Institutionally-Provided Career Preparation Services ( $N = 33$ )*

Which of the following institutionally-provided career preparation services did you utilize during your time as a student at the University? (Select all that apply)		
Career Preparation Services	Number of Responses	% of FYA Population
Career Conversation with Faculty	18	55%
Resume Review with Career Ambassador	14	42%
Career Fair Participant	10	30%
Career Counseling/Job & Internship Appointment with Industry Specialist	9	27%
On-Campus Information Session Participant	8	24%
Career Conversation with Mentor	8	24%
Career Week Sessions Participant	7	21%
I did not participate or use any institutional-provided career preparation services	7	21%
On Campus Interview Participant	3	9%
Project Externship Participant	2	6%
Mock Interview Participant	2	6%
Career Coaching Program Participant	1	3%
Other	1	3%

One respondent selected “Other,” when indicating which services they had participated in as a student. The respondent disclosed that they received guidance and held career conversations with their supervisor and other full-time staff within Human Resources. While this response could be categorized as a “Career Conversation with Mentor,” it is best described as a “Career Conversation with Employer/Colleagues,” which was not provided as an option. This participant’s response indicates that employers and colleagues can also serve as a source for advice regarding career development and future employment.



**Workplace readiness.** Three survey items were written with the intent of exploring students' perceptions of workplace readiness and the role that the university should play in the development of these skills. First year alumni participants were asked, "Do you believe that the university should play a role in preparing students for the workplace?" All twenty-eight respondents (100%) agreed that the university should play a role in helping students ready themselves for the workforce. This finding aligns with current research (Vedder et. al, 2013; Yee, 2012), which states that most students enter into higher education with the purpose of gaining knowledge and securing employment at the level of their degree (i.e. gainful employment).

Another survey item asked first-year alumni to identify which of the two categories of skills they believe employers value most in their new hires. To further assist in the selection, a definition of hard skills and soft skills was provided. Of the 28 first-year alumni respondents, 61% ( $n=17$ ) believe that employers look for new hires with strong soft skills, while 39% ( $n=11$ ) believe hard skills are most valuable. This response indicates that participants feel employers find greater value in individual's interpersonal skills, including how they communicate and work with others.

While the specific workplace readiness skills desired in new hires varies amongst employer, the literature points towards a common theme and skill set. To address this idea, participants were asked to endorse how well they believe the university prepared them in 14 areas including: (a) Oral Communication, (b) Written Communication, (c) Teamwork/Collaboration/Working with Others, (d) Problem Solving, (e) Initiative, (f) Knowledge within Major, (g) Technical Skills/Computer Skills, (h) Professionalism, (i) Work Ethic, (j) Critical Thinking, (k) Responsibility, (l) Project Management, (m) Customer Service,

and (n) Adaptability. For each area, participants were asked to select between four responses: not prepared, somewhat prepared, adequately prepared, and well prepared (Table 17). Responses were scored from 0 to 3 respectively with not prepared receiving 0 points and well prepared receiving 3 points. The mean ratings for each area of workplace readiness were averaged and reported in Figure 17.

Table 17

*Rating Frequencies of FYA Preparation by University Related to Workplace Readiness (N=28)*

Work Place Readiness Skill	Not Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Adequately Prepared	Well Prepared	Total Responses
Oral Communication	0	1	13	13	27
Written Communication	0	2	9	16	27
Teamwork/Collaboration/ Working with Others	2	3	11	11	27
Problem Solving	1	3	6	17	27
Initiative	2	5	9	11	27
Knowledge within Major	1	5	12	10	28
Technical Skills/Computer Skills	3	15	4	5	27
Professionalism	0	5	7	16	28
Work Ethic	0	2	8	17	27
Critical Thinking	0	2	10	15	27
Responsibility	0	5	4	18	27
Project Management	1	9	8	9	27
Customer Service	6	6	4	10	26
Adaptability	1	8	7	11	27

The mean ratings for alumni perceived preparation for all workplace readiness skills fall towards the middle and upper three-quarters of the scale (between 1.41 and 2.78), indicating that overall, first-year alumni respondents feel that the university *adequately prepared* them in the various areas of workplace readiness. Despite the central tendency, alumni seem to feel much more prepared in certain areas of workplace readiness than others. According to the data, alumni feel *well prepared* in the areas of *Oral Communication*, *Work Ethic* and *Written Communication*.

Alumni also indicated that they feel *adequately prepared* in 10 out of the 14 workplace readiness competencies. With mean ratings ranging from 1.59 to 2.48, alumni indicate that they have been prepared and received support from the university in their development of these skills. Though, the *customer service* and *project management* competencies both had an average rating of less than 2.0 which indicates that there is room for improvement. Of all 14 workplace readiness competencies, alumni reported feeling the least prepared in the area of *technical skills or computer skills*. With a mean of 1.41, the data indicates that alumni felt only *somewhat prepared* with these skills. Though the mean ratings offer a summary comparison of alumni perceived workplace readiness preparation provided by the university, Table 17 offers a more detailed view of the frequency with which alumni selected the ratings for each workplace readiness competency.

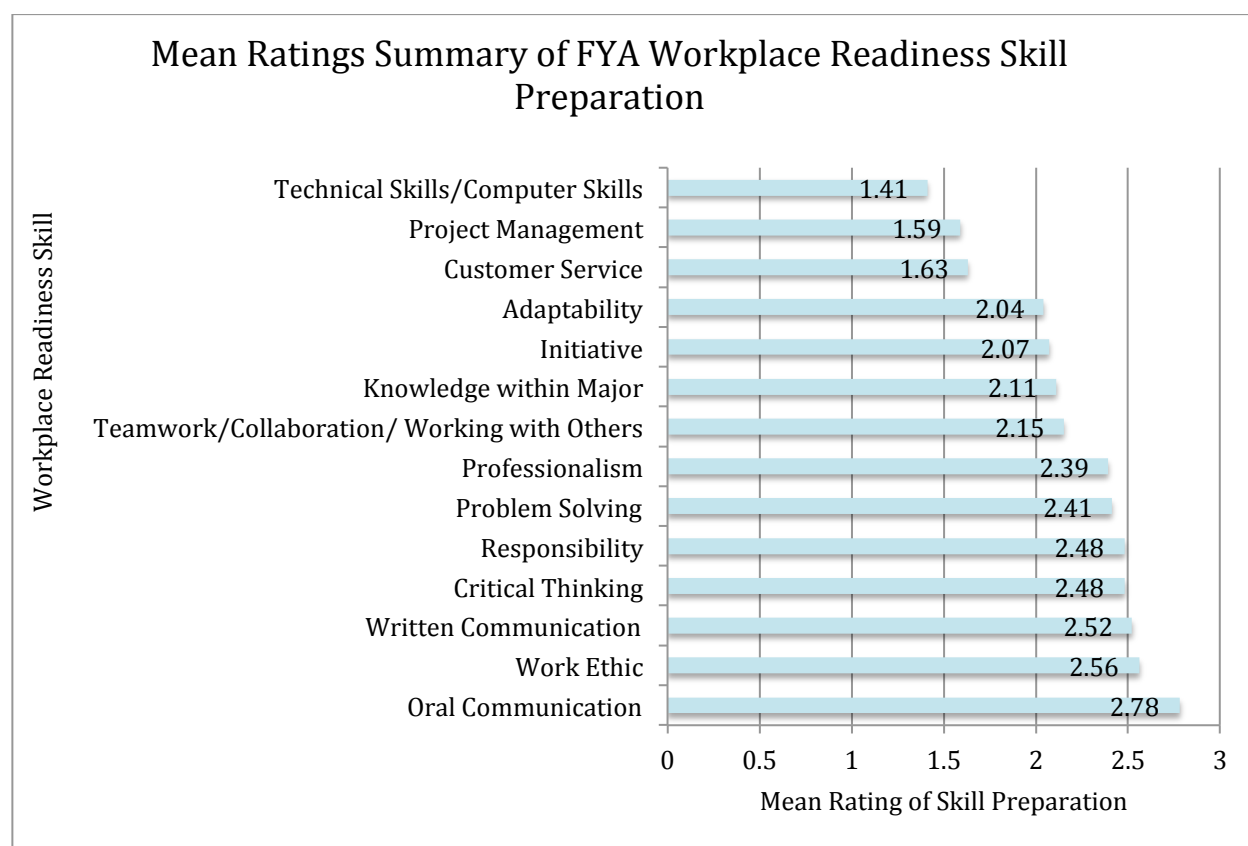


Figure 17. Mean ratings summary of FYA workplace readiness preparation by university (N = 28).

**Degree value.** Three survey items sought to gain alumni perceptions regarding the value of their degree. Many students graduate with thousands of dollars in student loans each year, making it important to determine whether they feel the degree is truly worth its monetary value. To begin, alumni were asked, “Do you believe that obtaining a college degree is necessary to be successful in today’s society?” Of the 28 total respondents, 71% ( $n = 20$ ) felt that earning a college degree is necessary in order to be successful in today’s society. Twenty-nine percent ( $n = 8$ ) shared that they did not feel a college degree is needed to be successful today (Figure 18).

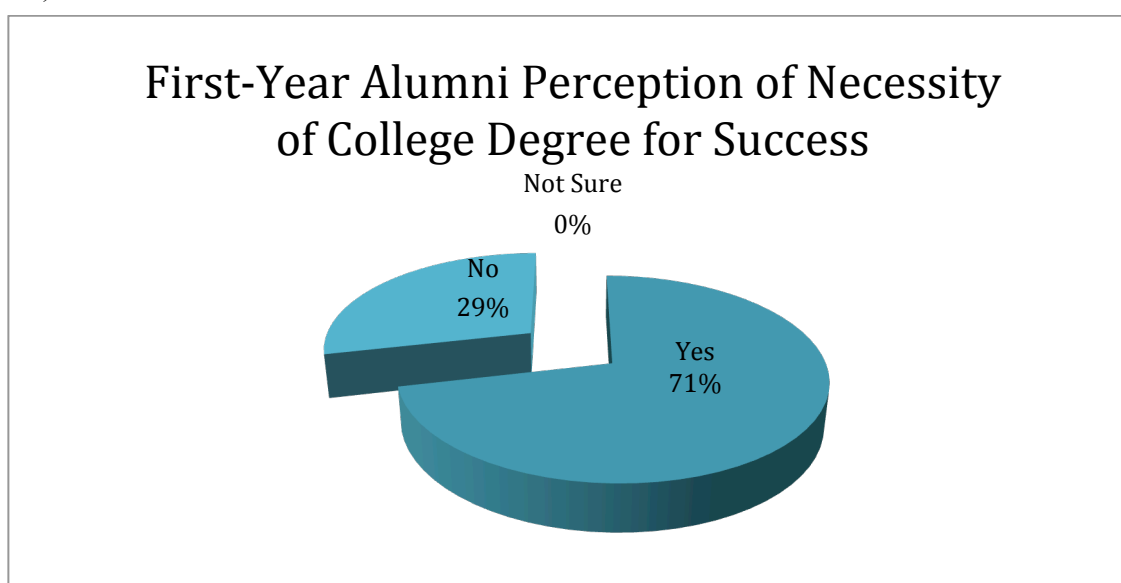


Figure 18. First-Year Alumni perception of necessity of college degree for success ( $N = 28$ ).

To take this question one step further and encourage personal reflection, alumni were asked, “How effective was your specific degree program in preparing you for work within your industry” (Figure 19). A total of 35 alumni responded to this question, with the majority (60%;  $n = 21$ ) stating that they felt their degree program was *moderately effective* in preparing them for industry-specific work. Twenty-three percent ( $n = 8$ ) believe their degree program was *not very effective*, while 17% ( $n = 6$ ) had the complete opposite experience, stating that their degree program was *very effective* (Figure 19). Finally, alumni were asked to consider, “To what extent has your college education prepared you for the next step in your career?” Alumni were given a

range of four options from *Not Prepared* to *Well Prepared*. Out of the twenty-eight respondents, nine respondents (32%) feel *well prepared*, while 6 respondents (21%) feel *adequately prepared*. The greatest number of alumni respondents felt only *somewhat prepared* (43%;  $n = 12$ ) and one respondent felt *not prepared* for their next career move. Figure 20 shows a graphic representation of alumni perceptions of their preparedness for the next step in their career.

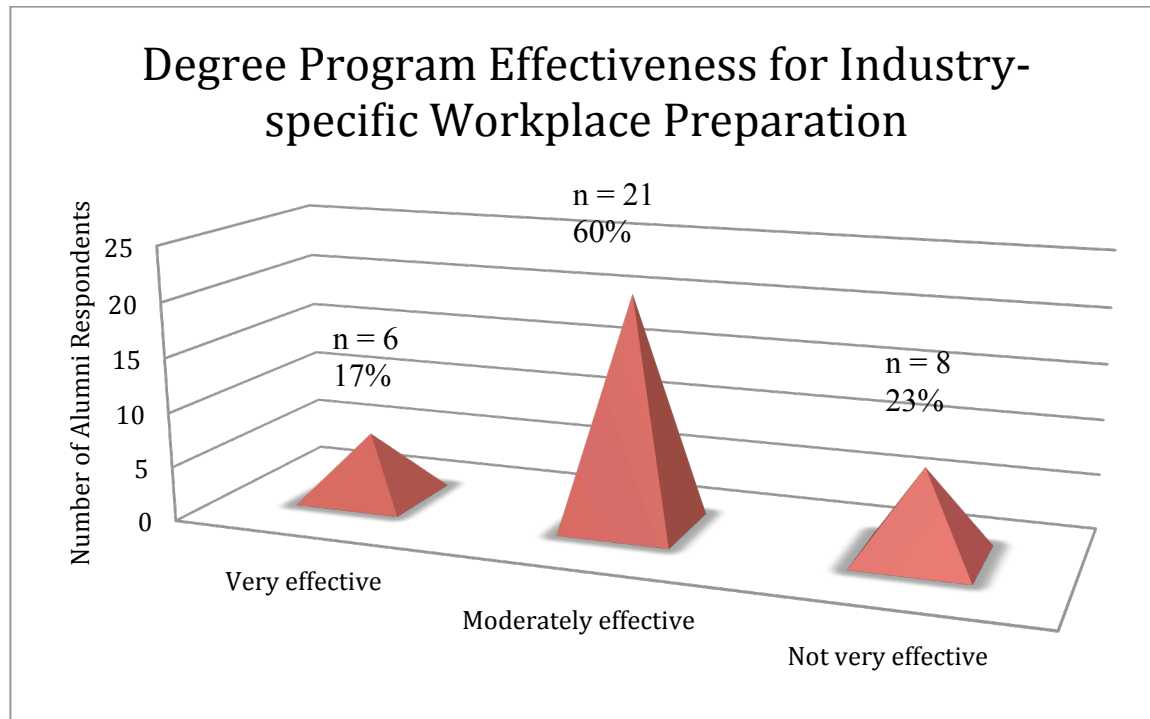


Figure 19. Degree-program effectiveness for industry-specific workplace preparation ( $N = 35$ ).

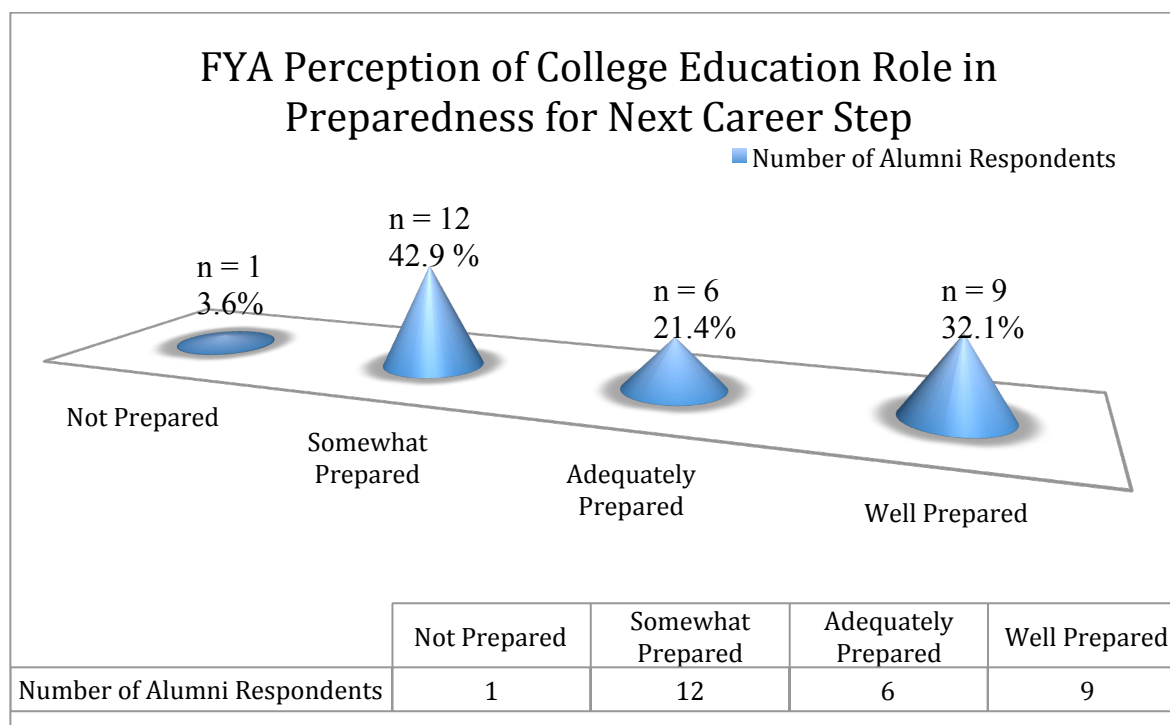


Figure 20. FYA perception of college education preparedness for next step ( $N = 28$ ).

### First-year Alumni Qualitative Findings

The open-ended items requested participants to share their thoughts and views regarding workplace readiness and the institution's role in their career development, as well as requested further explanation for their response to an earlier survey item. The thirteen narrative survey items produced a total of 394 coded passages which were further categorized into the following seven themes: (a) perception of degree value, (b) perception of employability needs and concerns, (c) expectations for university-offered career preparation resources, (d) expected roles in workplace preparation, (e) perception of workplace readiness skills desired by employers, (f) university career preparation participation and experience, and (g) university courses that support workplace preparation. Within each theme, subthemes were identified. A few of the themes have common subthemes. The identified themes and related subthemes are represented below in Tables 18-24, in addition to the inclusion of respondent quotes.

**Theme 1: Perception of degree value.** Within the survey, respondents were asked to describe why they believe that obtaining a college degree is necessary to be successful in today's society. Through the responses provided, three subthemes regarding first year alumni perception of the value of a college degree emerged: (a) establish candidate credibility, (b) necessary factor for employment/success, and (c) not necessary for employment/success. These three subthemes were utilized 21 times when coding participant responses. Table 18 lists the associated theme and subthemes.

Table 18

*FYA Perception of Degree Value*

Themes	Subthemes
Perception of Degree Value	Establish Candidate Credibility Necessary Factor for Employment/Success Not Necessary for Employment/Success

***Establish candidate credibility.*** Many first year alumni indicated that a college degree serves to establish a candidate's credibility and make them more competitive/valuable to employers. Five passages were coded to highlight this idea that a college degree sets one apart from those that have not earned their degree. One respondent noted:

“College degrees don't qualify people but they prove a person's credibility and competence.”

A few respondents pointed to the college degree as a representation that they are serious about working and have a strong work ethic. Two survey participants shared:

“Degrees present a person's will, effort, ability to follow through and so much more.”

“Without a college degree most employers are unlikely to take a candidate seriously.”

***Necessary factor for employment/success.*** Six of the eighteen participant responses were coded to reflect first year alumni perceptions that holding a college degree is a necessary factor for employment or success. Comments from respondents include, "...many places won't even look at you if you don't have a college degree," and "I think that a college degree is necessary to not only be successful, but it is necessary to get your foot in the door. I think that it has gotten to the point where an MBA is becoming the new standard." Reviewing the responses, one finds that many participants believe that without a degree, one might not have the ability to enter the career field they want. One respondent sums up this idea when they state, " Increasingly so, in a world where more people are attending college and jobs are becoming more competitive."

***Not necessary factor for employment/success.*** When reviewing responses, 10 passages highlighted respondents' views that having a college degree is not always a necessary factor for employment or success. One participant stated that success is defined by the individuals themselves and may not depend upon a degree.

"Depending on the definition of success, degrees may or may not be necessary."

Another shared:

"One does not need anything to be successful. However, a college degree does help in the chances of becoming successful."

A majority of respondents pointed to the acquirement of experience or technical skills as having more value than a college degree when being considered for an employment position. Two participants noted:

"If you have technical skills (no matter how you learned them) you will have opportunities for success."

"I've realized that work experience is just as important, if not slightly more, than a college degree."



One first year alumnus provided another perspective and related the relationship of having a college education with successful employment as being dependent upon society and that individual's role in society.

That question is dependent on the role in society. If everyone were to have a degree, the degree means nothing and says nothing about what makes you unique for a job. Every role is absolutely unique and must be prepared for in a different way. Some require doctorates, some undergrad, different majors, and apprenticeships. A student with a college degree in one field is no more valuable than a student from a trade school in another.

**Theme 2: Perception of employability needs and concerns.** First-year alumni were asked to reflect on the following questions; (1) “During your time as a student, what concerns did you have, if any, about being prepared for the workplace?”; (2) “How has your college education prepared you for the next step in your career?” and (3) “How effective was your specific degree program in preparing you for work within your industry?” These questions served as the foundation for the majority of the 41 coded passages relating to this theme, though some of the subthemes were utilized for student responses in relation to other survey items. Within this theme, six subthemes were created: (a) adaptation, (b) advanced/alternative degree, (c) employed, (d) lack of career opportunities (e) prepared/no concerns, and (f) prior experience (Table 19).

Table 19

*FYA Perception of Employability Needs and Concerns*

Themes	Subthemes
Perception of Employability Needs and Concerns	Adaptation Advanced/Alternative Degree Employed Lack of Career Opportunities Prepared/No Concerns Prior Experience

**Adaptation.** The transition from college to the workplace can be difficult for many students who are unsure of what to expect within the workplace. Many alumni reflected on their concern, during their time as students, that they would find difficulty in adapting to the workplace environment. Two participants shared their concerns they had as students that they would struggle with this change:

“Because The University is such a generally laid-back school, I was a little concerned about adapting to a professional and structured work environment.”

I was concerned I would be discontent with what the world offers to the average person, which is now my case. The University was an amazing school that fostered all the right desires but it left me unprepared for the harsh reality of post-graduate struggles.

Of the four coded passages, one respondent voiced their concern regarding the sheltering environment currently offered at the university and how it affected their transition.

I've found it very difficult to adjust to the environment at an ad agency. The University is a bubble. Though it's safe and nice and lovely while we are there, I feel that the environment insulates us from the real world. I love The University.

**Advanced/alternative degree.** When responding to survey items related to their feelings about entry into the workforce, many FYA shared that their industry of choice required that they earn an advanced degree. One participant shared their feelings about how their degree program prepared them, but the work they are seeking requires an additional degree.

“I feel like I need an additional law degree in order to get the type of work that I'm looking for within the industry.”

Another student stated:

“I feel that without a graduate degree, I am unable to work in my field.”

While the majority of the coded passages are similar in nature to the comments above, one respondent shared their concern that their degree of choice may not have been the best for work within the industry:

“My economics degree prepared me for some parts of a career in finance but a business or finance major probably would have been better.”

**Employed.** One survey item asked first-year alumni to reflect on how well they believed their college education has prepared them for the next step in their career. One student cited that they were easily able to find employment as a result. “I obtained a career shortly after graduation in my intended field of study.” Alternatively, another FYA expressed their experience post-graduation and how she is utilizing this time and her past college experience to prepare for her next step:

“It has prepared me to find my passion. I am currently not doing something I am passionate about, but I am using this time of transition to get experience before I take that next step.”

**Lack of career opportunities.** A few alumni respondents felt that despite having their college education, they struggled to find career opportunities in their desired field. One noted:

“Little to no jobs were available in the field post graduation.”

Another stated:

I am not currently employed in an industry that requires my degree. It would have been effective if I was employed in an area related to my degree but such positions are few and far between in the Los Angeles area.

**Prepared/no concerns.** When involving employment, feeling prepared and equipped to enter the workforce is a state of mind pursued by many. Several first-year alumni indicated that their experiences up until now have resulted in their feeling fully prepared for entry into the workplace. Of the 26 coded statements provided, when asked if they had any personal concerns about entering the workplace, 6 of these responses indicated that participants felt prepared and had no concerns. One FYA simply stated, “Had no concerns.” During the survey, being prepared and having no concerns was also identified as way of defining what it means to be workplace ready. One participant stated that you can define workplace readiness as, “I would define

workplace readiness as being aware of and prepared to handle the demands, responsibilities, and standards of the workplace.” Another participant responded that workplace readiness is, “...prepared to enter the workforce with the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities required to succeed in said prospective workplace.”

**Prior experience.** Many of the first-year alumni survey participants believe that in order to be seen as a competitive candidate, one must have ample prior experience in both the professional world and in outside leadership roles. One participant reflected on their feelings back when they were a student regarding this concern:

I think my only concern was my lack of involvement on campus. I did do three internships during my five years of undergrad, but many other students did this and participated in many things on campus (e.g. Greek life, clubs, etc.)

**Theme 3: Expectations for university-offered career preparation resources.** Within the alumni survey, respondents were asked several different questions relating to their experience with the university-provided career preparation resources. Whether the questions were directly addressing the efficacy of these programs or if they were asking alumni to reflect on their career development during their time as a student, many participants provided responses that highlighted their expectations for this type of programming. Responses to six out of the thirteen narrative survey items resulted in 60 coded passages highlighting the theme. The following theme of Expectations for University-Offered Career Preparation Resources with seven subthemes emerged: (a) continuing education support/pre-employment preparation, (b) diversity in programming, (c) experiential learning, (d) networking, (e) professional/staff faculty, (f) relevant coursework, (g) technical skill building (Table 20).

Table 20

*FYA Expectations for University-Offered Career Preparation Resources*

Themes	Subthemes
Expectations for University-Offered Career Preparation Resources	Continuing Education Support/Pre-Employment Preparation Diversity in Programming Experiential Learning Networking Professional/Staff Faculty Relevant Coursework Technical Skill Building

***Continuing education support/pre-employment preparation.*** Within one of the survey items, respondents were asked to share what preparation programs, services, or opportunities do they wish the University had offered to help prepare them for the workplace. One participant cited their wish that the university had offered continuing education support or more advanced pre-employment preparation when they stated, "A more comprehensive discussion about the necessity of graduate school and the steps to take to apply." Additionally, first year alumni were asked what suggestions they would offer to leaders of the University regarding how best to help prepare current students to be workplace ready. One participant suggested:

"Inform them of all their options post-grad (just like you've give high school students info about different university programs)."

Another student suggested:

"Hold more discussions about grad school."

In addition to suggesting opportunities that highlight opportunities to be found post-graduation, another respondent suggested a different type of preparation when he stated, "Warn students of the dangers of 4 years of comfort."

**Diversity in programming.** One of the greatest frustrations pointed out by first-year alumni is the lack of diversity amongst university career preparation programs. Several FYA shared that the wealth of opportunities were geared towards business students, while other departments and divisions were given less access to employers and programs related to their industry. Three participants cited their wish for greater exposure to their diverse industries:

“Career conversations and fairs should have also included technical representatives. Sometimes technical companies were present, but the representatives were for business roles with no interest in tech.”

“More science related opportunities from the career center would have helped.”

The university seems to have connections with "The Big Four" accounting firms which allow its students to obtain internships in those firms while still in undergraduate studies, the same is not so for other programs, even though the resources are available. Prime examples are Baxalta and Amgen here in Thousand Oaks, they are close enough for the university to build connections and expose students to industry in the field of the physical sciences.

**Experiential learning.** In addition to diversity in career preparation services provided, FYA also offered suggestions and shared the value of engaging in experiential learning and opportunities to gain experience outside of the classroom. One respondent stated, “Give them chances to be in the work place,” while another stated that university leaders should, “Expose them to the workplace.” The responses all shared a common theme of providing greater access to employment opportunities and experiences within their industry. One respondent took this idea one step further by insisting that it wasn’t just important to get students in the workplace, but also to simply expose them to what real life is like.

“The world is a much grittier place than Malibu. Make students get their hands and faces dirty once in a while to remind them what real life is like.”

**Networking.** When sharing concerns related to entering the workplace or suggestions for improving career development services, several FYA indicated that they were worried about not

having the right connections or ability to network with other working professionals. As a result, several survey respondents voiced their wish for the university to offer greater access to alumni and employers within their desired industries. One alumnus stated that they wanted, “More networking events and opportunities for informational interviews with Alumni and local businesses. Being in LA, I feel that the University could have so many opportunities to connect student to potential employers and that is not always the case.” Another alumnus shared the importance of helping students build their networks and connect with major employers when by stating:

“If the University could lend its brand to students, even sparingly, applicants could secure better internships and experiences.”

**Professional staff/faculty.** The faculty and staff within a university are key to defining the college experience. As a result, many FYA shared how important these educators are in their development both as individuals and future professionals. One alumnus stated:

I learned “both academically and integrally” from two professors. They have done more for my mind, soul, spirit, and growth than anyone else at The University... A smart man (professor) once told me: "You choose your professors just as much as you choose your classes; therefore, be wise, as you will be learning from them, too” or, something along those lines!

Other students stressed the importance of hiring quality faculty and staff who align with the mission and goals of the University. One alumnus suggested:

“Hire a more diverse group of administration/faculty/staff to promote diversity within the student population.”

Two other respondents echoed similar statements with the additional caveats that these individuals should also have the skills and background necessary to support students in their career goals beyond their time at the University.

“Hire Industry specialists (people who have experience outside the University community) to work in the career center and engage students with their impressive career history.”

“Hire tech advisors, please. It would be comforting if more of the career center had career experience outside the university.”

**Relevant coursework.** Some respondents suggested the adoption of courses or programs within their department, which focuses solely on preparing students for the workplace and life beyond college. Two noted:

More of a focus on developing professional work skills. Business majors seem a lot more prepared for the workplace than other students upon graduation. It would be helpful to adapt some aspects of their program to the rest of the school.

“Add computer science classes. The world is a place of technology, and not just tech students need to be prepared for that.”

Several students cited a wish for more variety in the classes offered, less traditional General Education classes, and more options to take classes that are applicable to life beyond the University. Two alumni suggested:

“More practical GE classes, coding clubs, incentives to learn hard skills.”

“Financial literacy classes as a non-major.”

**Technical skill building:** Survey participants were asked to explain what they believe the university role should be in the career development of students. A few alumni pointed out their belief that the university should take an active role in establishing programming that allows for students to build the technical skills necessary to be successful in the workforce. Two alumni suggested:

“I wish there had been more of a focus on real world skills - interview/interpersonal skills, basic computer training on PCs geared towards an office setting, excel training, and professionalism.”

“Computer classes for all majors. How to create/edit your LinkedIn. How to compose professional emails.”



One alumnus interested in the opportunity engage in classes that build the life skills necessary to become a confident and independent adult. One alumnus suggested the creation of classes that provide:

“More tangible things you need to deal with everywhere: taxes, insurance, 401k, problem people.”

**Theme 4: Expected roles in workplace preparation.** Two survey items asked first-year alumni to identify the role they believe students should play in their preparation for the workplace, as well as the role universities should play in students’ preparation for the workplace. The theme of Expected Roles in Workplace Preparation resulted in 43 coded passages with the following three subthemes: (a) knowledge-building, (b) real world/workplace preparation and experience, and (c) self-preparation (Table 21).

Table 21

*FYA Expected Roles in Workplace Preparation*

Themes	Subthemes
Expected Roles in Workplace Preparation	Knowledge-Building Real World/Workplace Preparation and Experience Self-Preparation

**Knowledge-building.** A few first-year alumni shared their thoughts regarding higher education as a hall of higher learning and not a professional training academy. One alumnus stated that the student role in the workplace preparation involves the need to, “take your classes seriously, you will miss out on stuff by not engaging.” Another alumnus shared their personal experience and what they felt their role was in workplace preparation:

“Working hard, studying, applying myself to my tasks, managing my time, practicing patience, working with others, and being adaptable.”

Another participant stated:

“My role was and still is to be a student. Every day, I strive to learn to do something new, try to make things more streamlined, or grow as an individual.”

***Real world/workplace preparation and experience.*** Many FYA cite the college experience as being a time where students are given unique opportunities to further develop their skills and gain professional experience. Several alumni stated that they believe it is was part of their role to ensure that they were preparing themselves for life beyond college and the workplace by engaging in internships and employment opportunities. One alumnus stated that their role involved:

“Seeking out the services available to me to explore different possible career paths/speaking to professionals in occupations I was considering pursuing.”

Another former student echoed a similar notion when they stated what their role involved:

“...gaining more professional experience through internships during college to build my resume.”

When questioned whether alumni believed the university should play a role in student workplace preparation, 16 coded passages were in agreement that the university has a duty to help support its students in their career development. When asked to further explain their reasoning, many respondents shared their beliefs on the importance of the university supporting students in their development of the skills and knowledge necessary to transition into the workplace easily. One former student stated:

“More so than educating students, universities should prepare students for employment. Students and their guardians almost always choose universities for the purpose of future employment rather than the pursuit of knowledge.”

One alumnus asked a question which summed up the feelings that were echoed by many when they stated:

“If not preparing students for the workplace, what is the purpose of a college?”

**Self-preparation.** For some first-year alumni, they perceived it was their responsibility for ensuring that they were prepared for entry into the workplace. Of the 22 coded passages regarding students’ role in workplace preparation, 9 of these coded passages represented alumni belief that self-preparation is key. This involves all stages of transition, from taking the initiative to seek out resources to ensuring that they are taking control of their future. Two alumni reflected on the following:

“I took initiative and did not rely on the help of The University.”

“My role was preparing myself for a career. A university should provide the tools, but the student needs to do the work. The University provided me with an education in my field, but I did my own career preparation.”

**Theme 5: Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers.** As the needs of industry and society continue to evolve, one of the more pressing questions that students and prospective employees want to know the answer to is, “What are the top 3 skills that are desired by employers?” Upon responding to this survey item and other items relating to defining workplace readiness, the theme of “Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers,” was established with the following 8 subthemes: (a) adaptability/creative, (b) communication, (c) confidence/self-efficacy, (d) critical thinker, (e) knowledge/technical skill, (f) leadership qualities, (g) professionalism/work ethic, and (h) ability to be taught. The above theme resulted in 703 total coded passages (Table 22).

Table 22

*FYA Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers*

Themes	Subthemes
Perception of New Hire Skills Desired by Employers	Adaptability/Creative Communication Confidence/Self-Efficacy Critical Thinker Knowledge/Technical Skill Leadership Qualities Professionalism/Work Ethic Ability to be Taught

**Adaptability/creative.** Many first-year alumni cite the contribution of creative, original ideas to invent something new and the ability to adapt to a changing work environment as being a highly sought after skill. Of the 26 responses, 6 survey participants responded that “Adaptability,” “Creativity,” or “Versatility,” should be one of the top skills desired by employers. Other students perceived, adaptability and being creative as key to defining workplace readiness. One student defined workplace readiness as, “...being able to adapt to an environment and quickly learn what you need to thrive while giving your coworkers confidence that you are a solid partner in the workplace.” Another defined workplace readiness as the following:

“Workplace readiness is the ability to jump into a line of work with some sort of background knowledge so that one is ready to quickly assimilate to the working environment.”

**Communication.** Several FYA identified having strong oral and written communication skills as being a necessary skill. Eight respondents stated that they believed employers are looking for new hires with strong “communication skills,” or “interpersonal skills.” An alumnus also included communication within their definition of workplace readiness by stating it

includes, “Being able to comfortably and actively present yourself. You need to be able to be ready to defend your worth - fight so you don't have to hop from job to job!”

**Confidence/self-efficacy.** A few survey participants believe employers are seeking candidates who are confident in their personal and professional aptitude, as well as have the motivation to succeed in their work. One alumnus incorporated confidence and self-efficacy into their definition of workplace readiness.

“Workplace readiness can be defined as having the internal confidence one needs to strive to succeed... if a person has the internal motivation and commitment to achieve, he/she will be ready for any workplace.”

Understanding the value of being confident as a prospective employee, one alumnus reflected on their feelings regarding their concern upon entering the workplace and their view of their own self worth.

“I was concerned about workplace adequacy and thinking that I was not worthy of being hired because there is somebody who is better at everything that I do.”

**Critical thinker.** The ability to use one’s discernment and reasoning when finding the solution to solve a problem is a skill that many believe necessary for success. A few alumni shared their perspective that to be workplace ready, one must have critical thinking skills. A few participants cited “critical thinking skills,” and “problem solving skills,” as being highly desired characteristics by employers.

**Knowledge/technical skill.** Though the desired technical skills vary based upon the role being filled, many first-year alumni believe that having industry-specific knowledge and a diverse technical skill set is a must for employment. When sharing the skills that they believe employers are looking for in new employees, many survey participants pointed to specific technical skill or knowledge, including “computer programming,” “tech/computer literacy,” and “professional experience.” Other survey participants pointed to having a general knowledge of

the industry and technology competence as being important. One alumnus stated that employers are looking for prospective employees who have, "proficiency in a particular skill set."

**Leadership qualities.** When considering the qualities that make a good leader, students identified the following characteristics as being indicative of this trait: (a) integrity, (b) personable, (c) responsibility, and (d) reliability. All of the above characteristics were named by first-year alumni as skills that could serve as unique traits that set themselves apart from other prospective candidates. One student described the importance of have a proper attitude as the following:

"...proper attitude (honest, fit in the existing work environment, etc.)..."

**Professionalism/work ethic.** The majority of first-year alumni believe that professionalism and having a strong work ethic are two skills, which are necessary employment within any industry. From being hard-working, to showing dedication to one's job, to being willing to learn, all of these traits are related to one's professionalism and personal work ethic. Out of the 26 responses, 16 survey participants identified professionalism and work ethic traits as being highly desired by employers. Two students noted that employers were looking for the following:

"... "go-getter" attitude"

"...Ability to think and work independently, but also as part of a group."

**Ability to be taught.** Several first-year alumni stated that desirable prospective employees are those who are eager to learn and are open to being taught. One participant stated that employers are looking for those who have an, "enthusiasm to learn," or who have are "willing to grow." Other respondents also included this trait within their definition of workplace readiness. One alumnus shared that employers should be looking for those who are:

“...willing to learn and grow professionally.”

Another alumnus echoed a similar sentiment while also pointing out the ideal candidate should have a “desire to learn new things.”

**Theme 6: University career preparation participation and experience.** In response to several of the open-ended survey items, many first-year alumni shared their reasoning for participating or not participating in university-offered career preparation programs and services during their time as a student. In addition, many also shared about their personal experiences with these programs and services, which lead to the creation of the theme, University Career Preparation Participation and Experience. Across the survey items related to this theme, the researcher coded 77 passages related to this theme or the following corresponding five subthemes: (a) disconnect between university and employers, (b) dissatisfaction with university programming and support, (c) effective university-offered programming, (d) positive influence on college experience, and (e) student initiative (Table 23).

Table 23

*FYA University Career Preparation Participation and Experience*

Themes	Subthemes
University Career Preparation Participation and Experience	Disconnect between University and Employers Dissatisfaction with University Programming and Support Effective University-Offered Programming Positive Influence on College Experience Student Initiative

***Disconnect between university and employers.*** Many survey participants provided suggestions for increasing student participation in career development programming through the establishment of better relationships between the University and outside employers. Several

participants felt that the skills and information being taught by the University do not fully align with what employers are looking for in their prospective employees. One student described their concern regarding the transferability of the skills being taught, as well as the need for more technical skill training when he states:

The lack of technical training for the sciences will not be sustainable in the next 10 years. If the university does not expand access to more technical course options for students the graduating classes of the next ten years will have a degree not work the paper.

Another student addressed the disconnect directly when they stated:

“I was equipped for a role, but students from most other universities were better equipped with more practical classes. All of the theoretical classes were necessary, but more practical classes would have been competitive.”

***Dissatisfaction with university programming and support.*** When reflecting on their past experiences with courses, services, and career development programming provided by the University, many alumni shared their dissatisfaction with the quality of programming and support that was provided. When asked how well college prepared them for the next step in their career, one alumnus stated:

“I have often said that college did not prepare me for the work place in any way. In many ways, it was not necessary for me to attend college because I learned no necessary or applicable skills.”

Dissatisfaction was expressed the most when survey participants were asked to share why they did or did not engage in career development opportunities provided by the University during their time as a student. Several grievances were voiced regarding the support provided by career services. Two alumni noted:

I went to every career center function I could and participated as often as possible. I was nearly always disappointed. I was given bad advice, pushed away from my dreams, and given outdated information that was not applicable to the real world. All businesses and representatives brought in were from business roles and looking for business students despite the fairly large natural science division also looking for jobs.



“The Career Center was very unhelpful when it came to more important matters, e.g., finding an internship. It helped me edit my resume but neglected me when I asked for help applying for an internship.”

One alumni echoed their frustration when they shared their experience in reaching out for help:

One of my "career advisement" sessions involved the advisor using the school job search and entering the criteria I provided while I coached her through and then read the results straight from the screen. I had done that myself. The advice given by the career center hurt my opportunities more than once.

Other past students indicated feeling like the programs and services offered were not worth their time. One alumnus stated:

“Very few institutional-provided career development opportunities were actually helpful.”

Another FYA echoed a similar sentiment when they stated:

I have not seen or felt that there are good resources for sports medicine majors besides those who want to be doctors. I feel that the university and the natural science division have a singular focus on doctoral work and tend to ignore other avenues in the medical field.

A few participants voiced frustration and dissatisfaction with the level of support offered by University faculty and staff. One alumnus noted:

Some of my professors were inept and had pregnancy brain and screwed us all over, especially me and violated MANY terms and conditions of The University's procedures...pregnancy-brain doesn't excuse the inappropriate, unprofessional, embarrassing, disgraceful, un-Christian behavior. Professor A\* (\*Professor's name was replaced with the letter A to protect identity) is another rotten apple at The University” he can't teach, and he certainly has no respect for his students. Perhaps sensitivity courses alongside a communications course would do him wonders. He is knowledgeable, but he is a dark cloud at The University. Expertise isn't 'everything', as you may agree, at The University.

***Effective university-offered programming.*** For many students, their experience with University-offered programming has been successful and effective. Some students shared their appreciation for the opportunities provided to them regarding career development and support.

Two students noted:

“I think the services and programs provided far exceeded my expectations of support.”

“I think The University has prepared me very well, so I don't think any more opportunities are needed. Students should take ownership of their development.”

**Positive influence on college experience.** While reflecting on their career development journey during college, a few alumni spoke specifically to situations or individuals that they felt had a positive influence on their college experience. One alumnus stated, “My professors all prepared me as best as they could.” Other alumni echoed similar experiences and stated:

“These people have had such a positive influence on my life, my mental health, my spiritual growth with God, etc.”

“The faculty and staff outside of the career center that I sought out were helpful and amazing. Some I became very close with and were great guides on my career journey.”

**Student initiative.** When asked about their level of participation in career preparation programs and services, a few alumni stated that their participation was a direct reflection of their personal initiative to engage with university resources. While some alumni took the initiative to be actively involved in their career development during their time as a student, others chose alternative sources. When looking at visiting the Career Services department, one participant stated, “I think the programs seemed so vast, I personally didn't know where to start.” Another alumnus stated, “I took advantage of some of the things the career center provided but did not take advantage of all the things that were given to me.” Other survey participants reflected that they took the initiative to take advantage of the opportunities provided. One alumnus stated, “I had 2 internships while in college and attended as many career center events as I could.”

**Theme 7: University courses that support workplace preparation.** To gauge a better understanding of alumni perception of workplace preparation provided by the institution, alumni participants were asked to reflect on what specific courses were the most beneficial to their personal career development during their time as a student. Twenty-three first-year alumni

provided responses to this survey item, which resulted in 36 coded passages indicating a specific class or classes that were deemed the most valuable. The question above resulted in the creation of the following theme and eight subthemes: (a) Business Administration, (b) Communications, (c) International Studies and Languages/Religion/Philosophy, (d) Humanities and Teacher Education, (e) Natural Science, (f) No Unique Courses, (g) Seminar, (h) Social Science (Table 24).

Table 24

*FYA University Courses that Support Workplace Preparation*

Themes	Subthemes
University Courses that Support Workplace Preparation	Business Administration Communications Humanities and Teacher Education International Studies and Languages/Religion/Philosophy Natural Science No Unique Courses Seminar Social Science

**Business Administration.** A few first-year alumni shared a memorable experience within a Business Administration course. Both alumni respondents shared their appreciation of their Business Ethics class by stating the following:

“Ethics, because it taught me how to determine right from wrong action.”

“Business Ethics, taught me about how businesses should operate and the numbers that matter the most when identifying a business' strong suits.”

**Communications.** The majority of survey respondents who identified a Communications course as being valuable to their workplace readiness pointed specifically to their public speaking course as being the most influential. One alumni explained their choice by stating, "

Public Speaking allowed me to understand how to communicate with people better.” Another student stated:

“Speech class - Because that not only teaches you how to communicate, but also better present yourself in front of employers or people you are training.”

***Humanities and Teacher Education.*** A few survey participants pointed to courses within the Humanities and Teacher Education department as being influential in their career development. One Education major cited their education courses as providing them with direct experience in teaching. “Education fieldwork (non-major) were real-life scenarios that tested my ability to function in the workplace.” Another student selected Great Books, and provided the following as their reasoning for the course standing out in their mind even beyond their time as a student:

“...great books exercised my thinking skills, keeping me versatile and sharp. Studying one thing is not helpful in the workplace. Being well rounded is necessary, too.”

***International Studies and Languages/Religion/Philosophy.*** Though not as popular amongst survey respondents, some alumni were greatly influenced by courses within the International Studies and Languages and Religion and Philosophy departments. The most notable courses as dictated by survey participants include, “Religion 3: religion & film,” and “cultural learning in an International Studies course.”

***Natural Science.*** Several alumni specified Natural Science courses as being influential in their career development because these courses focus specifically on developing technical skills that would be needed for success in the industry. One alumnus shared, “My computer science classes gave me the necessary textbook skills.” Another alumnus stated, “Microbiology, Genetics, and Statistics. They are the most applicable to today's scientific workplace.”

**No unique courses.** Rather than specifying a class or group of classes, several survey respondents described the courses that were beneficial based upon specific traits or skills that were developed during the experience. Two students noted:

“I cannot single any one class out. I think I took something out of each class.”

“Some of the most practical classes were the rigorous but inspiring ones.”

**Seminar.** A few survey participants identified seminar courses as equipping them with the skills and tools needed to be successful. One alumnus shared, “First year seminar. The professor helped the class learn that education and learning are essential to growth as a whole person. For the first time, the classroom was a life-learning environment.” Another student pointed to their senior seminar class by stating that the course, “...taught critical thinking.”

**Social Science.** A few alumni cited the inspiration they received through their participation in Social Science courses. One alumnus shared:

“...my upper division political science classes sharpened my writing skills, as well as my critical thinking abilities.”

Another student echoed a similar development of skills through coursework when they stated:

“...intro to sociology and psychology helped me to understand the reason why people think or act the way they do.”

### **Study Key Findings**

The sample group demographic descriptions, quantitative findings of preferences and experiences with the university, and thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses resulted in noteworthy findings that contribute to understanding student perceptions’ of their workplace readiness and the role the university should play in their career development. A diverse sample of 212 undergraduate seniors and 42 first-year alumni responded to the request to participate in

their respective population's workplace readiness survey. The rich responses from both populations inspired several key findings.

Both undergraduates and recent graduates agree that the university needs to play a role in students' career development. In addition, they feel it is the responsibility of students to take the initiative to engage in all career development opportunities that support their future goals and entry into the workplace. While not all students believe that a college degree is necessary to be successful, they do see its value in improving one's chances for achieving gainful employment and securing a position in a role they desire. Though definitions of workplace readiness differed slightly, both undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni view Professionalism/Work Ethic, Knowledge/Technical Skill and Leadership Qualities as the most important skills to have when looking to secure a job.

While many undergraduate students' and recent graduates' were pleased with their college experience, the majority cited a need for more targeted career development opportunities that are integrated within both their coursework and through employment preparation programming. Students are interested in relevant coursework that teaches them technical skills that will allow them to be successful both within their industry and outside the workplace. Not only this, but students are interested in a greater connection between their classroom/degree program and the world of work. Many are leaving the university feeling that they do not have the technical skills to be successful within their industry. The findings presented above provide further insight into workplace readiness and the university role in career development. Further discussion of these findings and their implications will be shared in the next chapter in addition to conclusions and recommendations for scholarship and practice.

## **Chapter Five: Research Study Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

This chapter presents what information was learned from this study about the perceptions that undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni have regarding workplace readiness and the role they feel the university should play in their career development. This section shares key study findings, conclusions, implications and recommendations for practice and future research. The researcher has eight years of experience in the field of education, and is currently working in higher education in a role that deals specifically with the issue of workplace readiness and career preparation through student employment. Additionally, the researcher works closely with the university career center whose mission is to develop programming that supports students in their personal and professional development. The potential for personal bias is possible based upon the researcher's personal experience with workplace readiness and their alma mater's lack of support in their career development. Despite this, the researcher affirms that potential personal biases were appropriately controlled to ensure the integrity of the conclusions drawn from the research.

### **Background and Significance**

“With significant numbers of workers retiring over the next 10 years, the United States is facing a serious challenge in preparing students to meet workplace demands in an increasingly complex, knowledge- and technology-based, global economy” (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006, p. 12). Over the past decade, increasing attention has been given to workplace readiness and the current gap between what students graduate knowing, and what skills employers expect their new hires to have mastered. Originally, the general belief was that the halls of higher education exist solely for the purpose of creating and distributing knowledge, and to encourage

the development of advanced thinking and communication skills (Chan, Brown & Ludlow, 2014). Over time, with the growth of industry and increased demand for a more knowledgeable workforce, public perception of higher education's purpose has evolved. Today's society, including students themselves, has come to "view higher education as a training ground for advanced vocational and professional skills" (Chan et al., 2014, p. 1). Unfortunately, not all higher education professionals share this same belief, and continue to see the role of higher education from a traditional perspective.

In institutions today, it is vital for higher education and industry leaders to work together to establish a shared vision and framework for the skills and knowledge students should gain to be prepared for entry into the workforce. The implications of this absence of collaboration between groups can be seen in student's recognition of their lack of basic workplace readiness skills to market themselves as potential employees (Bentley University, 2014a). With the demands of industry and cost of tuition continuing to rise, now more than ever, undergraduate students look to their institutions as their source for guidance and opportunities to develop themselves both personally and professionally. While most institutions have career services departments and programming that provides career development opportunities throughout the year, a disconnect exists between what students, administrators, and employers perceive as being most valuable. Thus, exploring undergraduate senior and first-year alumni perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role the university played in their career development can benefit researchers in higher education, various professionals within higher education; including administrators, faculty and career services staff, as well as current and future college students who are served through university-offered career development programming. This research study



helps with providing higher education institutions with the knowledge of students' needs to be properly equipped for success in the workplace.

**Conceptual framework.** The conceptual framework for this research study is workplace readiness. The topic of workplace readiness is vast with a variety of subtopics that influence its definition and place within society. Workplace readiness has become a highly debated topic over the past 15 years as several negative reports have been published, pointing to current students' difficulty in securing gainful employment upon graduation. While some students are pointing to the economy and lack of opportunities available, others pinpoint their frustration to a lack of workplace readiness skills as hindering them from finding employment. Employers themselves have expressed continued disappointment with the quality of candidates being produced by higher education, and have voiced concern about institutions poor support of students to be competitive in both local and international labor markets (Bentley University, 2014a).

With the research study focused on understanding student perceptions of workplace readiness and the role that the university plays in student career development, the literature review explored several key concepts related to purpose and nature of the study. To begin, the review focused on exploring how workplace readiness is currently defined and in turn what the corporate expectations are regarding the workplace readiness skills students come equipped with. For the purpose of this study, workplace readiness is defined as an individual's possession of key skills needed to meet the minimum qualifications for a specific job or position (ACT, 2015; Hais & Winograd, 2014; United States Department of Education, 2015). These key workplace readiness competencies are often transferable across all industries and necessary for success inside the ever-evolving workplace. A review of the literature on corporate expectations of applicant workplace readiness resulted in the review of several large-scale research studies

(ANTA, 1995; Bentley University, 2014a; Harris Interactive, 2013) which highlighted how “workplace skills are intensifying,” and “technical skills are no longer sufficient” (ANTA, 1995, p. 4). Essentially, employers are looking for well-rounded candidates who have both hard and soft skills. The presence of a skills gap and miscommunication of these expectations has resulted in the derailing of many graduates’ career paths and resulted in their underemployment upon graduation.

With many of these industry leaders and students themselves pointing to graduates’ lack of workplace readiness skills as being the reasoning why many are underemployed after graduation, a review of literature on this topic highlighted the connection between workplace readiness and underemployment. For the purposes of this research study, underemployment is described as a set of conditions where the number of hours worked, compensation, and skills required to fill a position are incompatible with the skill level of the employee. Many blame higher education for the underemployment of their graduates and resulting student loan crisis. In an attempt to mitigate this issue, the federal government determined that their first step should involve the passing of gainful employment regulations. These regulations were written with the intention of protecting students from procuring debt that they are unable to repay, and also to protect current taxpayers from the large loan default rates. Though relatively new, these “laws” current target for-profit career-specific programs to ensure that these programs are equipping students to secure graduation. Failure to show that the “average graduates’ estimated annual loan payment does not exceed 20% of their discretionary income or 8% of their total earnings,” could put the institution at risk of losing their federal student aid funding (Department of Education, 2014, para. 3).

These regulations serve as a warning for institutions both for-profit and non-profit, that they need to be more aware of the steps they are taking to prepare their students for life beyond their degree. As a result, many institutions are seeking out their career services departments to create a plan to address the skills gap and reimagine career development across the university system. A review of the literature focused on understanding the history of career services and its current function in higher education provided the researcher with necessary information concerning how the role of career services has changed over time. The studies revealed that today's career centers are playing an unprecedented role in the academic and professional development of the student body. Overall, the purpose of the literature review was to explore all of the different fields that relate to or influence student workplace readiness. The information provided established a foundation upon which the research study could then further explore the undergraduate senior and alumni participants' views regarding their personal experience and knowledge of the topic.

**Methods.** An embedded mixed methods research design was selected to gain insight on student perspectives of their workplace readiness and the role that the university should play in student career development. The undergraduate senior class of 2016 and first-year alumni class of 2015 were sent requests to complete an online survey. In total, two hundred and thirteen undergraduate seniors and forty-two first-year alumni, from the target institution, participated in the research study. Experiences and perspectives that support understanding of how workplace readiness and roles in career development are defined and established was a central focus of the study. A convenience sampling approach was used to invite students and graduates who met selection criteria from the target school.

Through the extensive review of the literature on workplace readiness, the researcher created the two online survey tools, written specifically for the two populations. Experts in the field of assessment and career services validated the survey questions being asked. All undergraduate senior participants responded to the Senior Workplace Readiness Survey while first-year alumni responded to the Alumni Workplace Readiness Survey. Respondents were asked to provide answers to both domains of the survey, with Part 1 containing demographic and background questions and Part 2 related to students' perception of workplace readiness and university provided workplace development. The main difference between the Senior and Alumni Workplace Readiness Survey was the wording used with Alumni to suggest they use reflection when answering the questions provided. Respondents for both forms of the survey answered 19 similar survey items, with alumni answering 3 additional questions related to their major and current employment status. The survey items were exported from Qualtrics into Excel and descriptive analytics were used to analyze quantitative data, while a thematic analysis was conducted on the open-ended responses. HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative software, was utilized to organize, sort, and support the coding process.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

Analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of multiple findings related to student perceptions of workplace readiness and university roles in student career development. The analysis of quantitative findings supported the analysis of the qualitative findings for both populations. In addition, the researcher found that the responses provided by undergraduate seniors were similar to the responses provided by alumni, indicating the researcher's assumption that alumni's year of experience in the work force would result in responses different from current undergraduate seniors was incorrect. The analysis of open-ended survey items produced

1,907 coded passages amongst undergraduate seniors and 394 coded passages amongst first-year alumni. All of the coded passages across both populations were grouped into the following seven themes: (a) perception of degree value, (b) perception of employability needs and concerns, (c) expectations for university-offered career preparation resources, (d) expected roles in workplace preparation, (e) perception of new hire skills desired by employers, (f) university career preparation participation and experience, and (g) university courses that support workplace preparation. Within each of these themes, more descriptive subthemes were identified. With the majority of undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni sharing similar perspectives and opinions regarding university roles in student career development, the key findings presented represent the collective view of both populations.

**Perception of degree value.** Undergraduate seniors and first year alumni both agree that holding a college degree is valuable, but may not be necessary to be successful. Overall, the majority of survey respondents believe that holding a college degree is necessary to be successful. While the majority selected “Yes,” that a college degree is necessary for success, when given the opportunity to provide reasoning behind their answer, many participants also pointed out that the definition of success is relative and dependent upon the perspective of the individual. Others provided alternative examples of roles that do not rely upon a college degree or individuals who had succeeded despite their lack of a Bachelor’s or advanced degree. For many participants, the value of the college degree lies in its ability to get one’s foot in the door and its establishment of one’s credibility when trying to secure gainful employment.

The finding that the majority of survey participants view a college degree as necessary for success, aligns with ideas presented by Vedder et al. (2013) and Yee (2012) who both agree that enrollment in higher education continues to rise yearly as students enter into institutions with

the belief that securing a college degree will help them to secure gainful employment post-graduation. From the student perspective, this finding is also supported by Bentley University (2014a), whose expansive survey found that almost three-quarters of current college students view their graduation from college as a sign that they are prepared for entry into the workforce.

**Perception of employability needs and concerns.** The transition from university setting to the real world can be difficult for those who are unsure of what to expect within the workplace. Many members of the public believe that this concern can be mitigated by higher education institutions through the education and programming provided to students. When discussing student perceptions of their experience with career development through programming provided by the institution and their specific academic program, the majority of undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni expressed that they felt their college education had prepared them for the workplace to the extent that they personally had no concerns about the transition. Others expressed that they must secure an advanced degree before beginning their transition out of the higher education setting. Of the alumni participants who shared concerns, the majority felt insecure about adapting to the needs of the workplace. A large group of undergraduate seniors and first year alumni also expressed their concern about securing employment, as well as their thoughts about feeling unprepared for entry into the workforce.

The significance of having the majority of respondents feeling that their institution and specific degree program have prepared them well, resulting in no concerns about the transition into the workplace cannot be ignored as overestimation of one's preparedness for the workplace has been identified as a continuous problem (Bentley University, 2014a; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Harris Interactive, 2013). This finding supports Accenture Strategy's (2015) report that 80% of the Class of 2015 feels their education prepared them appropriately for the

workplace, which was a sharp increase from 64% of 2013 and 2014 graduates who shared the same perspective. Additionally, a majority of recent studies highlight students' optimism regarding their confidence that they will have no difficulty in finding a job (Accenture Strategy, 2015; Harris Interactive, 2013). This idea is supported in the researcher's findings, with only a small selection of participants identifying their concern in securing employment post-graduation.

**Expectations for university-offered career preparation resources.** While many undergraduate students and recent graduates were pleased with their college experience, the majority cited a need for more targeted career development opportunities that are integrated within both their coursework and through employment preparation programming. Students showed interest in more diverse programming that provides equal access to quality employers regardless of the academic department size. Many shared that majors with a larger class size were afforded more opportunities to engage with employers in the industry. For those students whose major was less popular, many cited feeling that their industry was being ignored and less attention given to finding quality employers. Similarly, participants also expressed their desire for more opportunities to network with alumni and desired industry employers. With the university cited as having a strong brand and the university's proximity to a large, urban area, undergraduate seniors and recent graduates were adamant that finding quality individuals and companies to network with should not be extremely difficult.

While establishing stronger relationships with industry leaders is important to survey respondents, the data also indicated a wish for a greater connection between students' classroom/degree programs, the real world, and the world of work. A large number of participants shared feeling that their coursework was irrelevant and left them unprepared for adult responsibilities and without the technical skills needed to be successful within their

industry. Many respondents cited a need for the institution to provide coursework related to the skills needed to be successful independent adults outside of the general work environment. Finally, respondents cited the importance of universities' providing both continuing education support and services related to pre-employment preparation. From resume and cover letter review to deeper discussions on graduate school and its relationship to one's career choices, the university needs to stress the importance of these services and make them easily accessible to students.

Respondents' expectations for University-offered career preparation resources expose what students' view as being most valuable in assisting their career development. The needs and suggestions provided by survey respondents align with where shows there to be a gap or lack of support. According to Bentley University (2014b), 94% of participants agreed, "colleges and universities must incorporate and blend together academics and hands-on learning" (p. 14). The Gallup & Lumina Foundation (2013) found that 88% of surveyed business leaders were in favor of increasing collaboration between higher education institutions and businesses, which aligns with the need presented by students in this study for stronger relationships between the institution and quality employers.

**Expected roles in workplace preparation.** An overwhelming majority of undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni believe that the university should play an active role in students' career development. Many also attribute this idea as the reason for attending college initially. From assisting students in the preparation of their resumes and cover letters, to assisting them in building the knowledge necessary to succeed within their selected industry or field of study, survey participants expressly believe that the university is key in supporting students to find and secure gainful employment. Though, participants do not believe that the sole goal of the



institution should be in the preparation for future employment, they also view higher education as an opportunity for students to build the necessary knowledge to be successful within their industry, as well as see it as an opportunity for students to develop themselves personally. Additionally, both groups agree that it is the responsibility of students to take the initiative to engage in all career development opportunities that support their future goals and entry into the workplace. Whether this means taking advantage of university-provided career preparation services or seeking career development on one's own outside of the university, ultimately the power lies within the student to lay the foundation for their future.

In current literature, there is a divide amongst those in higher education regarding whether or not the university should play a role in workplace readiness. While this research study represents the perspective of undergraduate seniors and recent graduates, many university leaders view higher education as a hall of higher learning, not a training ground (Fischer, 2013). Conversely, current students and employers agree with the findings that the university should play an active role in student career development (Bentley University, 2014a; Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2010; Yee, 2012). The finding that highlights students as also being responsible for their career development aligns with 53% of students and recent graduates who believe they should put the onus on themselves to be prepared" (Bentley University, 2014b), p. 19).

**Perception of new hire skills desired by employers.** For the purposes of this study, workplace readiness is defined as an individual's possession of key skills needed to meet the minimum qualifications for a specific job or position (ACT, 2015; Hais & Winograd, 2014; United States Department of Education, 2015). Survey respondents were asked to share what skills they define as being workplace readiness skills. Undergraduate seniors cite

confidence/self-efficacy, knowledge/technical skill and professionalism/work ethic as being the most valuable workplace readiness skills to have when seeking employment. Recent graduates also believe that knowledge/technical skill, professionalism/work ethic, and adaptability/innovation are the most important workplace-readiness skills a prospective employee can have. While undergraduate seniors believe that confidence and self-efficacy are vital to be successful in the general work environment, recent graduates cited having industry-specific knowledge and technical skill as being the most important.

In addition to describing workplace readiness skills, participants were also invited to describe what skills they perceived as being the most sought after by hiring managers. Both undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni believe Professionalism/Work Ethic, Knowledge/Technical Skill and Leadership Qualities are the most important skills to have when looking to secure a job. While current students perceive Professionalism/Work Ethic as being the most important for securing gainful employment, recent graduates again highlighted Knowledge/Technical Skill as being the most vital. When sharing further insight into their decisions, recent graduates stated that professionalism and having a strong work ethic would set candidates apart from others, as these soft skills allow them to adapt more quickly to the general office environment and make them a more flexible employee. While alumni agreed that professionalism and work ethic were highly valuable, they shared that employers are looking for individuals with specific knowledge and technical skill that they do not have to train to take on a role. These differences in opinion regarding which skill is the most sought after by employers could have been influenced by first-year alumni's real-world experience, while undergraduate seniors were more likely to have made their choice based upon what they think an employer would look for.

The skills and qualities as cited above align with current workplace readiness skills and competencies that are cited by companies and professional organizations as the skills needed to be successful in today's workplace (ACT, 2015; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; NACE, 2014; NACE, 2015b). "Professionalism/Work Ethic, Knowledge/Technical Skill, and Leadership Qualities are all examples of applied skills" (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006, p. 9). These applied skills are "transferable to many occupational situations and areas," (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 32) and are considered to be core skills for employment.

**University career preparation participation and experience.** The majority of undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni believe it is important for undergraduate students to utilize career preparation programs or services provided by the institution. Yet, when asked about their interest in participating in their university-provided services, another perspective began to take shape. While the majority of respondents from both populations indicated that they were interested in career development and had actively engaged in provided programs, a significant number of participants shared that while they too were interested in career development, they did not because they felt that the programs or services did not apply to them. This response implies that many of the career development opportunities provided were targeted towards a distinct age group, industry, or degree program that did not meet the needs of the respondent.

Similar to the findings presented above, the majority of undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni were satisfied with the career preparation programs and services offered by the university. Many were appreciative of the services offered and cited specific academic programs and professors who had positively influenced their experience. However, a large population of respondents shared dissatisfaction with the services and support provided by the university in

relation to their career development. In addition, many also cited there being a disconnect between what the university offers and what current employers are looking for from recent graduates. Several individuals cited specific events involving the career center that resulted in a poor experience and desire to not utilize their services ever again. Other participants pointed out specific professors that they felt were ineffective. The majority of complaints pointed towards the irrelevance of many required courses when there is a distinct need for classes that assist students in building the skills necessary to become independent adults. Several individuals cited their specific wish for life skills classes that teach subjects including, but not limited to financial literacy, negotiation, conflict management, and how to file taxes.

A few of the survey items invited respondents to share about their experiences with career development or reasoning for the lack thereof. Many respondents indicated frustration with programming due to its conflict with their class schedules. Several shared that they were interested in participating, but other obligations were forced to take precedent over the services provided. For other respondents, their experiences or lack of were dependent on their initiative to make time and engage in the services provided. While some shared that they took advantage of any and all services provided to them, many also confessed that they did not take initiative or just chose not to follow through in participating.

Though several participants disclosed their lack of participation in career preparation programming or services, the majority of individuals did indicate that they were actively involved in developing themselves as professionals during their time as students. Over one-third of the undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni had their resume reviewed by a career services employee and engaged in career conversations with university faculty and staff. When reviewing the total number of services participated in by each student, the majority of undergraduate

seniors either participated in two services or less, or no services at all. The majority of alumni participated in either two services or no services during their time as students. Aside from utilizing these career preparation services, both undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni agree that gaining real experience in the workplace is extremely valuable. The majority of members from both populations engaged in either on/off-campus employment or internships during their time as students. Many of the members held multiple employment roles over the years spent at the university.

Though many of the findings presented are specific to the target institution, the overall theme of disconnect between higher education and industry employers is reflected in this study's findings and in current literature (CCAP, 2011; Bentley University, 2014a; CCAP, 2011; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Fischer, 2013; Glass, 2007; Zemke et al., 2000).

**University courses that support workplace preparation.** When considering the courses that undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni feel best prepared them for entrance into the workplace, the majority of respondents indicated that Communications courses and Seminar courses were the most supportive of their personal and professional development. Within the Communications department, both populations cited the general public speaking course as being the most valuable, due to it forcing students to step outside of their comfort zone and practice how to speak professionally in front of an audience. Many stated that this course helped them to develop confidence in themselves as communicators, ultimately leading to them feeling confident about presenting themselves within the workplace. Additionally, students also cited their seminar/service learning courses as being vital to their career development. Many survey participants shared their appreciation that these seminar and service learning courses allowed students to take what they were learning within the classroom and apply it to real world

situations. Professors would engage students in active learning and projects that required them to transfer content from the course into a context specific to their future career goals. Many saw these courses as vital to helping them experience what work within a specific field of study looks like at the professional level. While students shared specific courses from all major academic departments, the most influential courses seemed to be those that tested students' ability to function within the workplace of their desired industry. These courses challenged them to stretch what they had learned to think critically and solve problems. Ultimately, these courses served as the inspiration for students to know that they were in the right field or major of study.

### **Research Study Conclusions**

Once a thorough analysis of the research findings was conducted, five conclusions for this research were established. Each conclusion is discussed below, including implications for both practice and scholarship.

**Conclusion One: Alumni and seniors share similar views as to the importance of the university's role in supporting students' career development by integrating career-preparation programming within all areas of the student experience.** The first conclusion states that alumni and seniors share similar views as to the importance of the university's role in supporting students' career development by integrating career preparation programming within all areas of the student experience. Preparation for eventual entrance into the workforce is a part of higher education's role in educating the whole student (Koc & Tsang, 2015; Kuh, 1993). Therefore, it is important for institutions to reconsider the role that career services and other services that support career development, play in students' lives. The traditional model of career services involves several specialists who, though part of a team, work independently to advise students who wait until the eleventh hour to consider their future. They counsel students, host

career fairs, and encourage students to network, though these services are only engaged in by those who show up to receive assistance (Grasgreen, 2013). Staff members that work within career services are consistently challenged to find new methods of engaging students and encouraging their participation in services that support their career development. Administrators and career services staff have the added stressors of tracking student employment outcomes in an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the college education and career preparation support students are receiving. With all of higher education under scrutiny and in danger of being held accountable for the outcomes of their students, many institutions are seeking out methods by which they can support students to be successful post-graduation. Ensuring that students are fully prepared to enter into the workforce can pose a difficult challenge, however, the most effective way to promote career development is through the redesign of career services and integration of career development programming throughout the student experience (Grasgreen, 2013; Kuh, 1993; Pavol, 2014). Increased access and more opportunities to engage in career development programming was reported in this study as being what both undergraduate seniors and first year alumni wish would have been offered by their institution. Several respondents offered suggestions of areas in which the university could improve these services including providing more diverse program offerings that connect students to employers and introduce more relevant courses/workshops that teach skills which can be transferred into the world of work.

These findings support the work of George Kuh (1993) whose research found that student experiences outside of the traditional classroom setting substantially influence their learning outcomes and overall perception of their college experience. The understanding that learning opportunities outside of the classroom setting also significantly contribute to student learning supports respondents desire for more relevant courses/workshops and diverse career

development programming. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] and American College Personnel Association [ACPA] (2004) state that the general public holds higher education accountable for “graduating students who can get things done in the world and are prepared for effective and engaged citizenship” (Keeling, Dungy, American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004, p. 3). Participant responses reflect a similar attitude that the student experience should ultimately prepare the student body for life outside of the institution as independent adults and working professionals.

The findings reveal that current career development practices in their current state at the institution have much room for improvement and that an important component of educating the whole student is the integration of career preparation programming throughout the student experience both inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, the findings suggest that students are aware of their needs and are invested in seeing a change in the traditional model of services offered to students. This is consistent with Koc & Tsang (2015) and NACE (2015c)’s call for the reinvigoration of career services at the university level by engaging students to assist in the development of programming and bringing services to the students instead of making them elective. Workplace readiness must be a key component of the collective mission of faculty, career services staff, and administration to see students succeed post-graduation.

**Conclusion Two: Students expect the institution to serve as their talent scout for employers.** The second conclusion suggests that students expect their institution to serve as their talent scout for employers, thus paving the way for them to secure gainful employment upon graduation. At the core, now more than ever, students are entering into higher education based upon the idea that earning a college degree elevates their status in terms of future job prospects



and could potentially lead to finding work in their desired industry that pays well (Vedder et al., 2013; Yee, 2012). This aligns with respondents overwhelming agreement that the university should play an active role in student career preparation. While the university itself oversees and supports career preparation programming, the specific task of carrying out these events and services is often dictated by the institution's career services department. As noted in Koc & Tsang (2015), "Career services has a responsibility to educate the student about the nature of the work force and the student's potential place in it, and how the course of study pursued by the student may eventually affect the student's place in the work force" (para. 13). In addition to these tasks, career services exert time and energy in building relationships with employers in the hopes that they will be encouraged to recruit at their institution. While these tasks are still an integral part of the mission of career services, the ever-changing face of industry has initiated an evolution critical to the future of college career centers (Pavol, 2014).

Overall, the study's findings show that while students do not expect for the institution's career services department to act as a placement service, they do expect the university as a whole to advocate on their behalf for consideration as prospective candidates for employment. Respondents shared their belief that it is the responsibility of the university to lay the groundwork for them to build relationships and make connections with alumni and desired employers. This aligns with The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the work of Lori Meyer (2014) who cites employer engagement as the key to opening the door for students to engage in a variety of experiential learning prospects, which provide students with workplace experience. Boettcher (2009) also describes career services as the "portal for employers to interact with the institution and hire for internships and full-time positions" (p. 45). Participants of the study discussed how they believe that internships and opportunities to gain

real workplace experience are the most valuable activities one can engage in when preparing for entry into the workplace.

Bentley University (2014b) suggests a solution to addressing how universities can better support future generations for entry into the workforce by “improving career services through understanding what businesses are looking for in terms of internships, resumes, cover letters, and interviews” (p. 16). Multiple respondents from both populations shared their expectations for the university to be in communication with employers regarding their needs and expectations, and in turn deliver this information to students so that they can leverage this information to appeal to prospective employers to secure internships or full-time positions. Respondents in the study highlighted the need for university staff to also be well informed of employer needs, industry standards, and their expectations for prospective employees so that they can support students appropriately as they prepare for the employment process. This request aligns with the expectation of career services departments to help students make educated career choices based upon their goals and knowledge of information about the needs of the labor force (CAS, 2008; NACE, 2014). However, several participants discussed their frustrations with the level of knowledge shown by university staff in relation to preparing for employment in specific industries, despite it being their job to know. These behaviors ultimately lead to several students pursuing assistance in their career development outside of the university.

The findings indicate that students look to career services and the university to utilize their network and brand recognition while also creating a unique menu of services to engage with employers desired by students for future employment. Participants provided several examples of desired employers to engage with as well as a desire for increased accessibility to alumni who have been successful within their industry. This desire for greater connection to the

working world outside of the university aligns with recent recruiting trends and encourages career centers to evolve beyond their traditional role to become consultants and talent agents who create customized programming that connects students with their target employers (Collegiate Employment Research Institute [CERI] & Michigan State University [MSU] Career Services Network, 2013; Cruzvergara & Dey, 2014; Pavol, 2014). At present, many institutions, including the target institution, utilize a more traditional model of career services. In future studies, researchers can examine how career services can evolve and improve the current model of career services to reflect the needs of employers and current trends in recruiting.

**Conclusion Three: Career preparation programming and academics should not be mutually exclusive of each other.** Part of the focus of this study was to understand current students' and recent graduates' perception of the career development provided by their institutions, as well as to discover what these two populations perceived as being weaknesses of the university in this area. An analysis of the data resulted in findings that reveal students' belief that career preparation programming and academics should not be mutually exclusive of each other. Participants in this study described the need for courses that are relevant to their future career aspirations and that build skills, which are desired by prospective employers. Their desire for more relevant coursework and opportunities to develop themselves as professionals within the classroom closely aligns with the current Rethinking Success movement which focuses on enhancing student career development and encourages institutions to "embed the career development process into students' academic experience" (Grasgreen, 2013, para. 10). Bridgstock (2009) also contends that the development of career management skills should be a "mandatory and assessable component of coursework" (p. 40).

Findings from the survey indicated that participants found their capstone/service learning courses to be the most influential in their career development. Capstone courses are classes that combine discipline-specific information with workplace skills (Wessels & Sumner, 2014). Multiple students shared that these courses were the first time they were able to transfer what they were learning in the classroom into the context of the real world, and as a result, felt better prepared to enter the workplace. However, these courses often only last one semester and are taken during the students' senior year, which can often be too little, too late (Wessels & Sumner, 2014). Students have a desire to engage in coursework that not only enriches their knowledge but also builds skills that can be transferred to the real world and workplace. By implication, integrating career development into the academic curriculum can occur by strengthening ties between faculty and career services to partner together and offer instruction that marries the industry expertise of both groups (McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon & Kling, 2003).

The mission of higher education institutions is to inspire student success and equip students with the knowledge needed to venture confidently from the university to achieve their goals (NACE, 2014). However, with the career services department and academic divisions housed independently of each other, participants note that outside of their senior capstone or first-year seminar class, which they must seek out career development services, as it is not a part of their academic coursework. Thus, despite having a shared goal of preparing students for success, the perceived division and poor collaboration amongst these university departments implies to participants that the institution views career development as elective and not a priority component of the undergraduate learning process. The evidence and findings of this study reveal that participants perceive this division and believe it to be in the best interest of institutions to integrate career development services and programming within the general academic curriculum.

This conclusion aligns with Yee (2012) who described the need for faculty and institution administrators to make course material relevant to the real work and assist students to develop themselves as professionals.

**Conclusion Four: Alumni and seniors share a similar view that college serves as a training ground for students to become independent adults.** Overall, the study's findings indicate that both undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni have a general understanding of workplace readiness and how its development fits into the student experience at college. However, the study also highlights participants' belief that higher education is not only an opportunity to increase one's knowledge but to build the life skills needed to become independent adults and functioning members of society. This aligns with Yee's (2012) philosophy that society today continues to endorse college as the main path to adulthood, and "other than college and the military, there are few clear paths to adulthood" (p. 60). Additionally, Arnett (2000) and Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut & Scettersten (2004) describe current college students as being caught in the developmental stages of early adulthood where they are still learning autonomy and establishing both emotional and financial independence from their guardians.

With record numbers of first-generation students and immigrants entering into college yearly, almost three-quarters of higher education institutions offer a type of class designed with the intention of assisting students in adapting to adulthood and campus life (Wilgoren, 1999). Additionally, current students and recent graduates see college as a stepping-stone in their development from dependent minor to independent adult. Participant responses reflected that a college education should not only provide students with opportunities for career development, but also assist in building life skills both technical and intangible. This aligns with Bentley

University's (2014a) findings that society sees college as a time for students to prepare for their careers and develop other soft skills, including the ability to contribute to society or pursue one's goals. Current student and recent graduate respondents indicate that their most valuable college courses were seminar or capstone courses that promoted skill development and the transferability of skills into one's chosen career field. However, some participants emphasized that these courses were not enough to prepare them for the world outside of the institution. Instead, they describe a need for courses that focus on developing the technical skills that are synonymous with adulthood including filing taxes or financial literacy. Participants' suggestions for expanded course offerings to support the development of these life skills implies that they view college as the appropriate landscape for teaching these skills. This conclusion aligns to current research, which states that college has a responsibility to develop human capital that contributes to an effective society and addresses the needs of the high-skilled labor market (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001; Rychen & Salganik, 2005).

**Conclusion Five: Despite having personal experience within the workforce, the views of alumni and seniors were similar regarding workplace readiness.** Overall, the study's findings show that there is not a significant difference between the views of surveyed undergraduate seniors and recent graduates regarding their perceptions of workplace readiness and desired employability skills. A review of current literature highlights key differences in the views of students and business leaders regarding student workplace readiness, skill level, and which skills are believed to be most important for success (Bentley University, 2014b), but does not compare current college seniors with recent graduates. Before the study was conducted, the researcher of this study assumed that current seniors would have a different view of workplace readiness from alumni since alumni would have the advantage of having been in the workplace

for a year, thus making them more knowledgeable. This assumption was found to be inaccurate as both populations expressed similar perspectives of their own workplace readiness and the key skills that employers desire in their new hires.

Professionalism/Work Ethic, Leadership Qualities, and Knowledge/Technical Skill, in this study, were reported as the top three workplace readiness skills that participants believe are the most highly desired by hiring managers. This finding supports the conclusion and aligns with current research on employers perception of workplace readiness competencies and their preference for hiring new employees with strong soft skills, including professionalism, positive attitude, and being a team player (Bentley University, 2014b; Chegg & Harris Interactive, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2010; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). However, just having strong interpersonal skills is not enough, as many industry leaders consider desirable candidates to be those with both “high levels of skills synthesized with more generic interpersonal and communication competences” (Andrews & Higson, 2008, p. 419). As a result, possession of these skills and ability to showcase these traits enhance a candidate’s chance in being competitive for employment. Further, as the economy forces organizations to down-size, those who hold a combination of hard and soft skills will have a better chance of surviving potential position cuts (James & James, 2004).

When assessing their own level of readiness and aptitude for specific skills, participants in both groups expressed feeling that the university adequately prepared them in their development of both hard and soft skills. In addition, both groups also indicated that the university did the least in assisting them to develop computer skills or technical skills, implying that less emphasis being placed on technical skill development is a recurring trend that was not limited to just one academic year. Further, the mutual request by participants of both groups for

access to more programming that teaches technical skills implies students' desire to build confidence in this area. Similar to Bentley University (2014b) findings, participants' responses reflected that current and recent graduates wish that they had developed more technical skills during their time in college. While much of the current literature focuses on workplace readiness and specific skills, the main populations being compared are employers to students (Bentley University, 2014b; Chegg & Harris Interactive, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2010). Current students and recent graduates are often grouped together and distinguished as the millennial class. Therefore, while study findings align with current literature and support the conclusion that alumni and current students share similar views regarding workplace readiness, it is difficult to find current literature that shows a comparison of the two populations' perceptions.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Scholarship**

Several recommendations for practice and scholarship were recognized as a result of this study. The findings show that there are several underlying issues that contribute to current students' and recent graduates' perception of their workplace readiness and the role the university should play in students' career development. Although many of the participants reported feeling confident and prepared to enter into the workplace, a majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with programming, shared concerns for the future, or provided thoughts on how to improve current practices to best meet the needs of students in today's world. Higher education administration, faculty, staff, and students would all benefit from having a shared vision for career development during college. Yet, before this conversation can happen, higher education administrators need to identify how career development fits within the mission and goals of the institution. Once a shared vision and clear goals are established, the university can



begin the process redefining the student experience to support life inside and outside the university.

Recommendations to current higher education administrators is to partner with the university career services office and departments around the campus to brainstorm on methods for inserting opportunities for career development into all aspects of student life. By partnering with faculty members, student groups, and departments across campus, administrators can strategize on how best to support students as they develop themselves professionally. This process will allow all individuals who are invested in supporting positive student learning outcomes to help establish a framework that encourages the development of programming and opportunities that reflect a learning path and follow a career-preparation trajectory from the initial job search process to life in the workplace. The onus of creating and implementing these opportunities for career development is a collaborative effort that falls upon all leaders within the campus community.

Current students and recent graduates perceive college as an opportunity to both find their identity and develop the skills necessary to be successful, independent adults. For many students, entering college is their first experience having to make decisions for themselves and their future. With concerns expressed by many, it is recommended that the university take greater strides to provide students with programming that supports their development of technical life skills, including but not limited to classes on how to file taxes and financial literacy.

The role that the institution plays in establishing relationships with prospective employers and recruiters needs continued discussion and a fresh perspective. The traditional methods once utilized by institutional career services to encourage employers to recruit their students are no longer enough to draw the most desired industry leaders to their campuses. With students

holding institutions accountable for helping them make connections with their desired employers, new tactics must be considered to market the student talent pool in an age where competition is at an all-time high. In an effort to stay ahead of the curve, it is the recommendation of the researcher that institutions work closely with business and industry leaders to discuss what employers are looking for in their prospective employees and how they select their recruitment. This information can then be used to guide programming topics and establish new methods for encouraging recruitment at the institution. The knowledge shared by employers can also be used by faculty members to inform their instruction. The integration of career development into the academic curriculum both encourages transferability of skills and assists in preparing students to be successful within their industry.

Participant responses reflected the need for additional research in the area of exploring specifically how students' workplace readiness skills are being developed during their time at the university. This type of study has the potential for providing further insight into which programs are the most effective in their support of student skill development as compared to other programs, which could use improvement. Another area of added research can involve investigating the best practices of institutions that integrate career development into their academic curriculum and how this influences student perceptions of their workplace readiness. There is also an opportunity to add research in the area of university and employer relations. The research could explore the experiences of career services staff and their perception on the evolution of career development and its relationship to the student experience. All of these recommendations for further research could add to the collective literature and inform universities on various methods that could be employed to successfully navigate and support students in the ever-changing landscape of higher education

### **Limitations and Study Validity**

This study was limited to undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni of a single, private, non-profit higher education institution in California. While a significant number of individuals from the undergraduate senior and first-year alumni populations participated in the study, the results cannot be generalized to the greater population of undergraduate seniors and recent graduates of higher-education institutions. The purpose of this research was to understand students' perceptions of their own workplace readiness and the role that the university should play in student career development in an in-depth way. While the sample population utilized in this study does not accommodate for generalization of the research's results to the broader undergraduate senior and first-year alumni populations, the results will be used to guide future programming and help to inform future decisions of how the institution should move forward to address the skills gap of their students and properly prepare them for the working world.

To ensure study validity, plausibility and credibility must be considered (Gray, 2009). With knowledge of workplace readiness and experience in working with student professional development, the researcher has years of experience studying and working with students to assist them in preparing for the workplace. The researcher also has experience working with outside employers to determine what skills they desire most when hiring for their businesses or organizations. Although there is a great amount of literature on the skills gap and employers' perceptions of students' workplace readiness, there is little literature on students' perceptions of their workplace readiness and university-offered career development.

The researcher used reflexivity during the full research process to ensure that the findings gathered from the data analysis phase were accurate. The researcher also reviewed data and text files multiple times and confirmed that the coding was correct based on the qualitative data

provided. To ensure the dependability of the study, the researcher conducted an in-depth analysis of the study data, using HyperRESEARCH software for the qualitative data. Upon completion of the coding process, the researcher enlisted the help of a peer reviewer who had experience in higher education and research. This study identified several findings that can be used specifically by higher education institutions to help guide the selection of their career development programming and its place inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Closing Comments**

With the number of students enrolling into college on the rise, the pressure placed on higher education institutions to educate and prepare students for the workplace can be overwhelming. Traditionally, the mission of higher education institutions has always been to serve as a hall of higher learning. Yet, with the majority of college enrollees equating a college degree with gainful employment and the chance at a better life, many are calling for the mission of higher education to include supporting the career development of their students. This poses a difficult challenge for institutions that now find themselves at a crossroads between tradition and progress, struggling to meet the demands of employers and the general public. Thus, as the labor market evolves to meet the needs of society, so do the skills desired by employers looking to fill open positions. Therefore, it is up to higher education to bridge the gap between what their students graduate knowing and the knowledge and skills employers expect them to graduate with. This goal can be obtained if higher education makes a concerted effort to partner with employers to remain informed of current trends within the industry and then integrate the information into the total student experience.

There is a need for career development programming both inside and outside of the classroom. It is not enough for this programming to only be found through opt-in events and

services provided by a career services department housed separately from the academic departments. It was eye-opening to read the responses of students who are rarely given the opportunity to articulate their wants, needs, and experiences as they relate to their personal perceptions of workplace readiness or their interaction with university-provided career development opportunities. This research study reaffirmed the researcher's belief that the university needs to play a greater role in career development to ensure that their students feel empowered and successful as they transition from the university setting into the real world. The outcome of this study provides higher education administration and professionals with insight and suggestions to inspire ideas for new programming and ways in which higher education institutions can support the career development and workplace readiness of their students.

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## APPENDIX A

## Human Subjects Research Certificate

**COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI)**  
**GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH - BASIC/REFRESHER CURRICULUM**  
**COMPLETION REPORT**  
 Printed on 03/16/2014

**LEARNER** Molly McCarty Gonzales (ID: 4074994)  
**DEPARTMENT** EDLT  
**EMAIL**  
**INSTITUTION** Pepperdine University  
**EXPIRATION DATE** 03/15/2017

**SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH - BASIC/REFRESHER** : Choose this group to satisfy CITI training requirements for investigators and staff involved primarily in Social/Behavioral Research with human subjects.

**COURSE/STAGE** Basic Course/1  
**PASSED ON** 03/16/2014  
**REFERENCE ID** 12904417

REQUIRED MODULES	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction	03/15/14	3/3 (100%)
Students in Research	03/15/14	9/10 (90%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBE	03/15/14	4/5 (80%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBE	03/15/14	4/5 (80%)
The Regulations - SBE	03/16/14	5/5 (100%)
Assessing Risk - SBE	03/16/14	4/5 (80%)
Informed Consent - SBE	03/16/14	4/5 (80%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE	03/16/14	5/5 (100%)
Research with Prisoners - SBE	03/16/14	4/4 (100%)
Research with Children - SBE	03/16/14	4/4 (100%)
Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools - SBE	03/16/14	4/4 (100%)
International Research - SBE	03/16/14	3/3 (100%)
Internet Research - SBE	03/16/14	4/5 (80%)
Research and HIPAA/Privacy Protections	03/16/14	5/5 (100%)
Vulnerable Subjects - Research Involving Workers/Employees	03/16/14	4/4 (100%)
Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects	03/16/14	2/5 (40%)

For this Completion Report to be valid, the learner listed above must be affiliated with a CITI Program participating institution or be a paid Independent Learner. Falsified information and unauthorized use of the CITI Program course site is unethical, and may be considered research misconduct by your institution.

Paul Brunschweiler Ph.D.  
 Professor, University of Miami  
 Director Office of Research Education  
 CITI Program Course Coordinator

## APPENDIX B

## Graduate School of Education and Psychology IRB Letter of Approval



Pepperdine University  
 24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
 Malibu, CA 90263  
 TEL: 310-506-4000

## NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: April 14, 2016

Protocol Investigator Name: Molly Gonzales

Protocol #: 16-01-181

Project Title: Examining Institutional Career Preparation: An Embedded Mixed Methods Study on Student Perceptions of Workplace Readiness

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Molly Gonzales:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chairperson

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives

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## APPENDIX C

## Research Target Institution IRB Letter of Approval

\*\*\*The IRB Letter of Approval from the target institution has been removed to retain confidentiality and anonymity\*\*\*

## APPENDIX D

## NACE Professional Standards for College and University Career Services

*Mission (pp.5-6).* Career services must advance the mission of the institution as well as support academic and experiential learning programs to promote student learning and student development. Within this context, the primary purpose of career services is to assist students and other designated clients in developing, evaluating, and/or implementing career, education, and employment decisions and plans.

*Program (pp. 7-11).*

*1. Career Advising/Counseling:*

The institution must provide career advising/counseling to assist students and other designated clients at any stage of their career development.

*Career services should offer career advising/counseling services that:*

- encourage students to take advantage of career services as early as possible in their academic programs.
- provide career advising/counseling through scheduled appointments and drop-ins with individuals, online/distance resources, group programs, career planning courses, outreach opportunities, special events, information technology, and/or any other available resources.
- refer students to other counseling and resource agencies if assistance is needed beyond the scope of career advising/counseling.
- help students explore careers through part-time employment and experiential learning programs.
- maintain appropriate records for future work with the students.
- assist students to assess their skills, values, and interests and understand how these relate to academic and co-curricular options and career opportunities.
- help students develop and apply job-search competencies and decision-making skills.
- educate students about fraudulent employment practices.
- help students understand the potential benefits and pitfalls of social media and the importance of a positive Internet “footprint.”

*2. Online and Distance Career Services:*

- Career services must provide current, valid, and reliable online resources that help students pursue their career goals.
- Career services must provide online and/or distance career services to students who are not able to access services traditionally provided on campus.

*3. Career Information:* Career services must make current and comprehensive

career information accessible to students and other designated clients as they explore and make career decisions.

*Career information should include the following categories:*

- self-assessment and career planning;
- occupational and job market information (local, regional, national, global);
- graduate/professional schools;
- employment/job search;
- resources and strategies for revising career plans;
- job, experiential learning, and internship listings;
- employer and industry information; and
- guidance on using specific current and emerging tools.

*4. Employment Services:*

*Career services must assist students and other designated clients in:*

- exploring a full range of career and work possibilities that match their career goals and workplace/community fit.
- preparing job-search competencies and tools to present themselves effectively as candidates for employment.
- obtaining information on employment opportunities and prospective employers and industries.
- using social media effectively and building an Internet presence with regard to the job search.
- connecting with employers through campus interviews, job listings, referrals, direct application, networking, job-search events, publications, and information technology.
- understanding various employment categories and how these might impact them, such as part-time employment, full-time employment, contract employment, independent contract employment, commission-based employment, work-from-home, virtual employment, and so forth.
- understanding the following employer types and how employment might impact them: third-party employers, home-based employers, contract employers, multi-level employers, and so forth.
- making informed choices among a variety of options.

*5. Graduate and Professional School Planning*

*Career services must assist students and other designated clients in:*

- identifying graduate or professional school programs that match their career goals.
- effectively presenting themselves as graduate/professional candidates for further study.
- obtaining information on graduate/professional school programs through a variety of sources.

- connecting with graduate/professional schools through campus interviews, referrals, direct application, events, publications, and information technology.

6. *Experiential Learning*: Career services should provide or support experiential learning programs that include such areas as student employment and/or cooperative education, work-based learning, apprenticeships, internships, service learning, civic engagement, shadowing, and volunteering experiences.

*Organization and Administration (pp. 12-16)*. An institution must appoint, position, and empower a leader or leadership team to provide strategic direction for accomplishment of mission and goals, to manage career services, and to align career services with the mission of the institution and the needs of the constituencies served.

*Human Resources (pp.17-23)*.

- Career services must have an adequate number of qualified professional and support staff to fulfill its mission and functions.
- Career services must institute hiring and promotion practices that are fair, inclusive, and nondiscriminatory.
- Career services must be staffed by persons who, in combination, provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform primary program functions effectively.

*Financial Resources (pp.23)*.

- Career services must have dependable sources and adequate funding to ensure achievement of its mission and goals.
- Career services must demonstrate financial stewardship and strategy, fiscal responsibility, and cost effectiveness consistent with institutional policies and procedures, as well as local, state, and federal regulations.

*Facilities (p.24)*. Career services must have adequate, accessible, and suitably located facilities appropriate for constituents served, to support the unit's mission and goals.

*Technology (pp. 25-26)*.

- Career services staff must be well-informed about current trends and uses of technology and be able to anticipate emerging technologies for use in career services.
- Career services offices must implement appropriate technology (non-hardware) relevant to institutional and unit mission and goals for career services and ensure that appropriate technology is used to deliver services.

*Institutional and External Relations (pp. 27-28)*. Career services must develop and maintain productive relationships with relevant institutional stakeholders and external key stakeholders and audiences.

*Employer Relations and Recruitment Services (pp. 29-30).* Employers are both vital partners in the educational process and primary customers for college/university career services. Each career services unit must develop policies and practices to ensure the highest quality employer relations and services.

*In addition, career services should:*

- *develop and implement marketing strategies to cultivate employment opportunities for students.*
- *optimize opportunities for employers to engage candidates for employment.*
- *maximize students' exposure to employers while respecting appropriate academic and co-curricular standards.*


(NACE, 2014, pp. 5-27).

## APPENDIX E

## Senior Workplace Readiness Survey

## Welcome Waves!

Thank you so much for taking time to participate in this study. Below is the required information about participating in the research. If you click on the, "I Agree," box at the bottom of the page, you'll be directed immediately to the survey questions.



Survey Information: Examining Institutional Career Preparation: An Embedded Mixed Methods Student on Student Perceptions of their Workplace Readiness

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Molly Gonzales, a current doctoral student in Learning Technologies and Dr. Kay Davis, faculty chairperson of the research at Pepperdine University, because you are a current undergraduate senior. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read this document. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** The study is designed to investigate undergraduate senior perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role that their institution played in the career preparation process.

**PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT:** If you agree to voluntarily to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a 19-question survey with sub-questions, which consists of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the survey you have been asked to complete. Please complete the survey alone in a single setting. Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate and/or withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the survey at any time without penalty. You also do not have to answer any questions you don't want to, click "next" or select "I prefer not to respond" in the survey to move to the next question.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:** Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

**ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION:** The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items in which you feel comfortable.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** There will be no identifiable information obtained in connection with this study. Your name, address or other identifiable information will not be collected. Therefore, your identity will not be associated with your responses. The results of this research study may be published, but only reported as an aggregate summary of the group data collected. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

**INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION:** I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact M. Gonzales if I have any other questions or concerns about this research. You may also contact Dr. K. Davis, the faculty chairperson for this research.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500, Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu).

Sincerely,  
M. Gonzales

I acknowledge that I have read and understand what participation in the study entails. By selecting "Yes," I consent to participate in the survey and am ready to begin. If you decline participation within the survey, please feel free to close your browser at this time or select "No, I decline to participate" which will direct you to the end of the survey.

- Yes, I consent to participate. Please take me to the survey.
- No, I decline participation.

**Instructions:** As you go through each question, please answer truthfully and to the best of your ability. If you are not comfortable answering a question, please feel free to skip it and advance to the next using the arrows below the question. You also have the opportunity to go back and change your answers if needed. The completion bar at the bottom of your screen will help you keep track of how far you have advanced within the survey.

Q1 Gender:

- Male
- Female

Q2 Ethnicity/Race:

- Native American/American Indian or Alaska Native
- Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino

- African American
- Asian or Asian American
- Non-Hispanic White/ Caucasian
- Multiracial
- Not listed

Q3 Did you hold any form of employment during your time as a student at the University?  
(Select all that apply)

- On-Campus Student Employment
- Off-Campus Student Employment
- Community Service (i.e. Boys & Girls Club, Jumpstart, etc.)
- Internships
- Research Assistant
- Teaching Assistant
- Resident Advisor/Spiritual Life Advisor
- Student Organization Leader
- Other

Q4 If you selected "Other," please share what other forms of employment you held while a student at the University.

Q5 Which of the following institutionally-provided career preparation services did you utilize during your time as a student at the University? (Select all that apply)

- Career Counseling/Job & Internship Appointment with Industry Specialist
- Resume Review with Career Ambassador
- Career Fair Participant
- On-Campus Information Session Participant
- On Campus Interview Participant
- Career Coaching Program Participant
- Project Externship Participant
- Mock Interview Participant
- Career Week Sessions Participant
- Career Conversation with Faculty
- Career Conversation with Mentor
- Other
- I did not participate or use any institutional-provided career preparation services

Q5a If you selected "Other" in question #5, please explain what other institutional provided services or career preparation programs you have participated in during your time as a student.

Q5b If you selected "I did not participate..." in question #5, please explain why you chose not to participate in these services or programs.

Q6 Do you believe that it is important for undergraduate students to utilize career preparation programs or services provided by the institution?

- Yes



No

Q7 How do you define workplace readiness?

Q8 List the top 3 skills that you believe employers are looking for when they hire new employees.

Q9 During your time as a student, select the response that best describes your level of interest in pursuing institutionally-provided career development opportunities for workplace preparation?

- I have been interested and have planned to take action but do not follow through
- I have been interested and have taken action
- I have been interested but the opportunities did not apply to me
- I have not been interested in pursuing institutional-provided career development opportunities

Q10 Please explain your response to question #9.

Q11 As a soon-to-be graduate, your perception of workplace readiness is valuable. During your time as a student at the University, to what extent do you feel that you have been prepared in the following areas? Using the drop-down menu provided, please identify your level of preparedness for each workplace readiness skill.

	Not Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Adequately Prepared	Well Prepared
Oral Communication	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Written Communication	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teamwork/Collaboration/ Working with Others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Problem Solving	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Initiative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowledge within Major	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technical Skills/Computer Skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professionalism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work Ethic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Critical Thinking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Responsibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Project Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customer Service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adaptability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 Which category of skills do you believe employers value most in their new hires?

- Hard Skills (Hard skills can be described as an individual's professional or technical skills that are tangible).
- Soft Skills (Soft skills can refer to an individual's interpersonal skills, ability to communicate, ability to collaborate, and practice patience).

Q13 Do you believe that obtaining a college degree is necessary to be successful in today's society?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

Q13a Please explain your response to question #13.

Q14 Do you believe that the university should play a role in preparing students for the workplace?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q14a Please explain your response to question #14.

Q15 During your time as a student, which class or classes do you believe best prepared you for the workplace? Why?

Q16 As a student, what do you feel is your role in preparing yourself for the workplace or a career?

Q17 During your time as a student, what preparation programs, services, or opportunities do you wish the University had offered, that would have helped prepare you for the world of work?

Q18 What concerns do you have, if any, about being prepared for the workplace? If you have no concerns, please indicate so.

Q19 To what extent has your college education prepared you for the next step in your career?

- Not Prepared
- Somewhat Prepared
- Adequately Prepared
- Well Prepared


Q19a Please explain your response to question #19.

## APPENDIX F

## Alumni Workplace Readiness Survey

## Welcome Waves!

Thank you so much for taking time to participate in this study. Below is the required information about participating in the research. If you click on the, "I Agree," box at the bottom of the page, you'll be directed immediately to the survey questions.



**Survey Information: Examining Institutional Career Preparation: An Embedded Mixed Methods Student on Student Perceptions of their Workplace Readiness**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Molly Gonzales, a current doctoral student in Learning Technologies and Dr. Kay Davis, faculty chairperson of the research at Pepperdine University, because you are a first year alumni of the University. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** The study is designed to investigate first year alumni perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role that their institution played in the career preparation process.

**PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT:** If you agree to voluntarily to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a 19-question survey with sub-questions, which consists of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the survey you have been asked to complete. Please complete the survey alone in a single setting. Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate and/or withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the survey at any time without penalty. You also do not have to answer any questions you don't want to, click "next" or select "I prefer not to respond" in the survey to move to the next question.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:** Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

**ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION:** The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items in which you feel comfortable.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** There will be no identifiable information obtained in connection with this study. Your name, address or other identifiable information will not be collected. Therefore, your identity will not be associated with your responses. The results of this research study may be published, but only reported as an aggregate summary of the group data collected. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

**INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION:** I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact M. Gonzales if I have any other questions or concerns about this research. You may also contact Dr. K. Davis, the faculty chairperson for this research.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University.

Sincerely,  
M. Gonzales

I acknowledge that I have read and understand what participation in the study entails. By selecting "Yes," I consent to participate in the survey and am ready to begin. If you decline participation within the survey, please feel free to close your browser at this time or select "No, I decline to participate" which will direct you to the end of the survey.

- Yes, I consent to participate. Please take me to the survey.
- No, I decline participation.

**Instructions:** As you go through each question, please answer truthfully and to the best of your ability. If you are not comfortable answering a question, please feel free to skip it and advance to the next using the arrows below the question. You also have the opportunity to go back and change your answers if needed. The completion bar at the bottom of your screen will help you keep track of how far you have advanced within the survey.

Q1 Gender:

- Male
- Female

Q2 Ethnicity/Race:

- Native American/American Indian or Alaska Native
- Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino
- African American
- Asian or Asian American
- Non-Hispanic White/ Caucasian
- Multiracial
- Not listed

Q3 What was your undergraduate major(s) during your time as a student at the University?

Q4 How effective was your specific degree program in preparing you for work within your industry?

- Very effective
- Moderately effective
- Not very effective

Q4a Please explain your response to question #4 regarding the effectiveness of your program for work within the industry

Q5 Are you currently employed in a role that is associated with your degree program or major?

- Yes, directly related
- Yes, somewhat related
- Yes, though role is not related
- I am currently not employed

Q5a If you responded, "I am currently not employed," please select the response that most accurately reflects your current situation.

- Actively seeking employment within my industry
- Actively seeking any type of employment
- Not seeking employment
- Enrolled in Graduate School
- Other

Q5b If you responded "Other," please explain your response.

Q6 Did you hold any form of employment during your time as a student at the University?  
(Select all that apply)

- On-Campus Student Employment
- Off-Campus Student Employment
- Community Service (i.e. Boys & Girls Club, Jumpstart, etc.)
- Internships
- Research Assistant
- Teaching Assistant
- Resident Advisor/Spiritual Life Advisor
- Student Organization Leader
- Other

Q6a If you selected "Other," please share what other forms of employment you held while a student at the University.

Q7 Which of the following institutionally-provided career preparation services did you utilize during your time as a student at the University? (Select all that apply)

- Career Counseling/Job & Internship Appointment with Industry Specialist
- Resume Review with Career Ambassador
- Career Fair Participant
- On-Campus Information Session Participant
- On Campus Interview Participant
- Career Coaching Program Participant
- Project Externship Participant
- Mock Interview Participant
- Career Week Sessions Participant
- Career Conversation with Faculty
- Career Conversation with Mentor
- Other
- I did not participate or use any institutional-provided career preparation services

Q7a If you selected "Other" in question #7, please explain what other institutional provided services or career preparation programs you participated in during your time as a student.

Q7b If you selected "I did not participate..." in question #7, please explain why you chose not to participate in these services or programs.

Q8 Do you believe that it is important for undergraduate students to utilize career preparation programs or services provided by the institution?

- Yes
- No

Q9 How do you define workplace readiness?

Q10 List the top 3 skills that you believe employers are looking for when they hire new employees.

Q11 Reflecting back to your time as a student, select the response that best described your level of interest in pursuing institutionally-provided career development opportunities for workplace preparation?

- I was interested and had planned to take action but do not follow through
- I was interested and did take action
- I was interested but the opportunities did not apply to me
- I was not interested in pursuing institutional-provided career development opportunities

Q12 Please explain your response to question #11.

Q13 As an alum of the university, your perception of workplace readiness is valuable. Reflecting back to your time as a student at the University, to what extent do you feel that you were prepared in the following areas? Using the drop-down menu provided, please identify your level of preparedness for each workplace readiness skill.

	Not Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Adequately Prepared	Well Prepared
Oral Communication	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Written Communication	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teamwork/Collaboration/ Working with Others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Problem Solving	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Initiative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowledge within Major	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technical Skills/Computer Skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professionalism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work Ethic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Critical Thinking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Responsibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Project Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customer Service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adaptability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q14 Which category of skills do you believe employers value most in their new hires?

- Hard Skills (Hard skills can be described as an individual's professional or technical skills that are tangible).
- Soft Skills (Soft skills can refer to an individual's interpersonal skills, ability to communicate, ability to collaborate, and practice patience).

Q15 Do you believe that obtaining a college degree is necessary to be successful in today's society?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

Q15a Please explain your response to question #15.

Q16 Do you believe that the university should play a role in preparing students for the workplace?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q16a Please explain your response to question #16.

Q17 During your time as a student, which class or classes do you believe best prepared you for the workplace? Why?

Q18 Reflecting back to your time as a student, what do you feel your role was in preparing yourself for the workplace or a career?

Q19 Reflecting back to your time as a student, what preparation programs, services, or opportunities do you wish the University had offered, that would have helped prepare you for the world of work?

Q20 Reflecting back, what concerns did you have, if any, about being prepared for the workplace? If you had no concerns, please indicate so.

Q21 To what extent has your college education prepared you for the next step in your career?

- Not Prepared
- Somewhat Prepared
- Adequately Prepared
- Well Prepared



Q21a Please explain your response to question #21.

Q22 What suggestions can you provide to leaders of the University regarding how best to help prepare students to be workplace ready?

## APPENDIX G

## Documented Permission from Authors for Figures Used

Hello!

My name is Molly Gonzales and I am a current doctoral candidate at Pepperdine University. I am in the process of preparing for the final defense of my dissertation this December. My study focuses on understanding student perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role they feel the university should play in student career development. Within my literature review, I would like to utilize the Figure below to highlight the applied skills that employers are looking for in their prospective hires. The Figure would be cited appropriately underneath the figure and in the References section where a website link could also be provided to [p21.org](http://p21.org).

Basic Knowledge/Skills	Applied Skills
English Language (spoken)	Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving
Reading Comprehension (in English)	Oral Communications
Writing in English (grammar, spelling, etc.)	Written Communications
Mathematics	Teamwork/ Collaboration
Science	Diversity
Government/Economics	Information Technology Application
Humanities/Arts	Leadership
Foreign Languages	Creativity/ Innovation
History/Geography	Lifelong Learning/ Self Direction
	Professionalism/ Work Ethic
	Ethics/ Social Responsibility

<sup>1</sup> Applied skills refer to those skills that enable new entrants to use the basic knowledge acquired in school to perform in the workplace.

My citation will need to be listed within APA formatting if there is a specific language you would like to utilize. I would truly appreciate your permission in my being able to use this figure as it will serve to educate others and promote further scholarship on the role that workplace readiness should play in higher education. I look forward to your response. Thank you so much for your consideration.

Best,  
 Molly Gonzales, M.S.  
 Professional Development Coordinator  
 Student Employment Office  
 Pepperdine University  
<http://www.pepperdine.edu/studentemployment/>

CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE: This email and any files transmitted with it are subject to the laws and policies regulating confidentiality related to communications with and/or of Pepperdine University's alumni, students,

1 of 2

11/28/16, 8:51 AM

Good Morning,

Thank you for your inquiry. Our materials and educator resources are free for educational purposes. We are happy to grant you permission to use P21 materials, as long as no P21 materials and references are used to imply P21 endorsement. Please see our full terms of use here: <http://www.p21.org/our-work/use-of-p21-content>

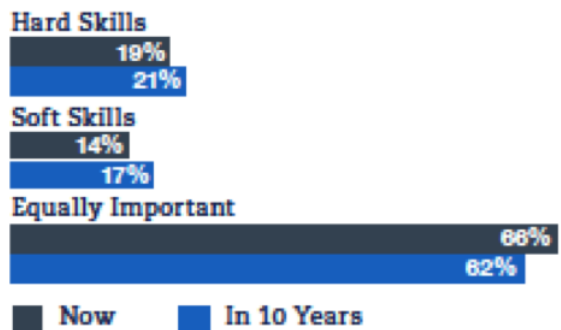
Please let me know if you have any questions.

Warm Regards,  
 Mia Medina

Mia Medina  
 Administrative Assistant  
 Partnership for 21st Century Learning

Hello!

My name is Molly Gonzales and I am a current doctoral candidate at Pepperdine University. I am in the process of preparing for the final defense of my dissertation this December. My study focuses on understanding student perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role they feel the university should play in student career development. Within my literature review, I would like to utilize the Figure below to highlight the perspective regarding the value of hard skills vs. soft skills. The Figure would be cited appropriately underneath the figure and in the References section where a website link could also be provided to Bentley University's Prepared U webpage.



**Six in ten of all respondents say that hard and soft skills are equally important today (66%) and ten years from now (62%).**

My citation will need to be listed within APA formatting if there is a specific language you would like to utilize. I would truly appreciate your permission in my being able to use this figure as it will serve to educate others and promote further scholarship on the role that workplace readiness should play in higher education. If there is another point of contact I should consider for this permission, I truly would appreciate a contact for who to reach out to. I look forward to your response. Thank you so much for your consideration.

Best,

Molly Gonzales, M.S.

Professional Development Coordinator

Student Employment Office

Thank you so much for reaching out, Molly. This sounds like fascinating work you are doing at Pepperdine. We are happy to help. I am copying our Chief Marketing Officer, Val Fox, for her input on the citation, as she leads the PreparedU project. We'd love to read your dissertation if this is something that you can share!

Congratulations on your academic accomplishment.

All the best,

Susan

Susan Sandler Brennan | Associate Vice President, University Career Services

Bentley University

Hi Molly –

We would be happy to have you cite our research findings in your study and appreciate you including relevant links, information, etc. Here's a short blurb about our efforts if helpful:

### **PreparedU Project**

The [PreparedU Project](#), launched by Bentley in Fall 2013, is an initiative to shed light on the question, "Are college graduates prepared for the workforce?" Bentley fielded a national survey to learn more about [millennials in the workplace](#), [millennial women in the workplace](#) and how [millennials view work](#). The research findings served as a springboard for convening educators, graduates, corporate recruiters and business leaders across multiple communication platforms to wrestle with the challenging issues facing a new generation of graduates.

If possible, please share the research when it's published.

Best of luck and congratulations!

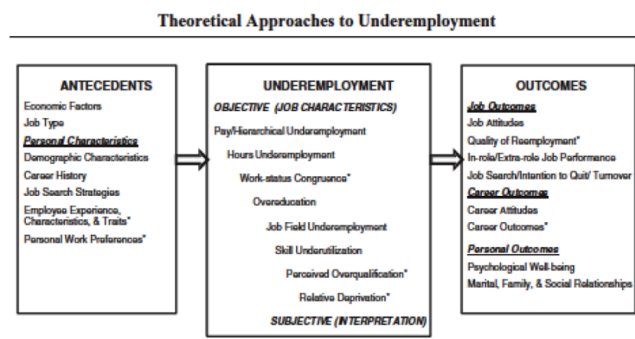
**VAL FOX**

*Chief Marketing Officer*

**BENTLEY UNIVERSITY**

Dear Professor Ryan,

My name is Molly Gonzales and I am a current doctoral candidate at Pepperdine University. I am in the process of preparing for the final defense of my dissertation this December. My study focuses on understanding student perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role they feel the university should play in student career development. Within my literature review, I would like to utilize the Figure below to highlight the connection between students' lack of workplace readiness and underemployment. The Figure would be cited appropriately underneath the figure and in the References section.



\*Indicates dimensions added since Feldman's (1996) review.

My citation will need to be listed within APA formatting if there is a specific language you would like to utilize. I would truly appreciate your permission in my being able to use this figure as it will serve to educate others and promote further scholarship on the role that workplace readiness should play in higher education. I look forward to your response. Thank you so much for your consideration and if you could please provide me with Professor Harvey's email contact, I would truly appreciate it so that I could request his permission as well. Thank you again!

Best,

Molly Gonzales, M.S.

Professional Development Coordinator

Student Employment Office

Pepperdine University

<http://www.pepperdine.edu/studentemployment/>

Hello Molly,

I'm sorry for the delay. Of course! You're welcome to use our figure. I'm interested in hearing more about your dissertation.

All the best,

Fran

Sent from my iPhone

Dear Ms. Gonzales,

Thank you for contacting the United States Department of Education. Your email was referred to this office and we are pleased to respond.

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Once again thank you for contacting us and we wish you the best on your dissertation!

Sincerely,

Information Resource Specialist  
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United States Department of Education