

# **Raising The Bar**

***Employers' Views On College Learning In The Wake  
Of The Economic Downturn***

**A Survey Among Employers Conducted On Behalf Of:  
The Association Of American Colleges And Universities**

**By Hart Research Associates**

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*From October 27 to November 17, 2009, Hart Research Associates interviewed 302 employers whose organizations have at least 25 employees and report that 25% or more of their new hires hold either an associates degree from a two-year college or a bachelor's degree from a four-year college. Respondents are executives at private sector and non-profit organizations, including owners, CEOs, presidents, C-suite level executives, and vice presidents. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 5.7$  percentage points.*

## Overview

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- Employers want their employees to use a broader set of skills and have higher levels of learning and knowledge than in the past to meet the increasingly complex demands they will face in the workplace. Within this context, to the degree that employers' emphasis on hiring will be affected by the economic downturn, the shift will be toward greater emphasis on hiring four-year college graduates.
- Only one in four employers thinks that two-year and four-year colleges are doing a good job in preparing students for the challenges of the global economy. A majority of respondents think that both two- and four-year colleges need to make at least some improvements to prepare students for the global economy, including one in five who thinks that significant changes are needed.
- Employers endorse learning outcomes for college graduates that are developed through a blend of liberal and applied learning.
  - Employers believe that colleges can best prepare graduates for long-term career success by helping them develop **both** a broad range of skills and knowledge *and* in-depth skills and knowledge in a specific field or major.
  - Employers endorse several emerging educational practices that two- and four-year colleges are implementing to ensure that students graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed after graduation. They are most supportive of practices that demonstrate a) students' acquisition of both depth of knowledge in their major and broad skills, b) students' ability to apply their college learning in real-world settings, and c) their development of ability to conduct research and develop evidence-based analysis. They also see potential in practices that require focus on ethical decision-making and require direct experience with methods of science to understand how scientific judgments are made.
  - A majority of employers believe that colleges should place greater emphasis on a variety of learning outcomes developed through a liberal education, which include the following:
    - Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world**
      - Concepts and new developments in science and technology (70%)
      - The ability to understand the global context of situations and decisions (67%)
      - Global issues and developments and their implications for the future (65%)

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- The role of the United States in the world (57%)
- Cultural diversity in America and other countries (57%)

### **Intellectual and practical skills**

- The ability to communicate effectively, orally and in writing (89%)
- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills (81%)
- The ability to analyze and solve complex problems (75%)
- Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings (71%)
- The ability to innovate and be creative (70%)
- The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources (68%)
- The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics (63%)

### **Personal and social responsibility**

- The ability to connect choices and actions to ethical decisions (75%)
- Civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement (52%)

### **Integrative learning**

- The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences (79%)

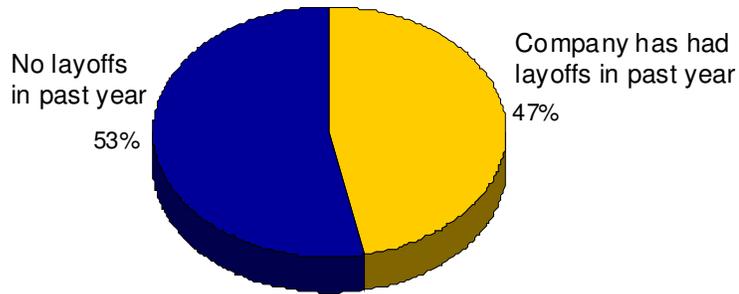
## Key Findings

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**1** Nearly half of employers say their organizations downsized over the past 12 months, but nearly two in five expect their organizations to increase their staff level in the next year. Forty-seven percent (47%) of executives say their organization downsized or laid off employees within the past year, with those at larger organizations slightly more likely to have done so. Whereas 52% of those at organizations with 500 or more employees say their organization downsized, the figure is 46% among organizations with 100 to 499 employees and 42% among those at organizations with 25 to 99 employees.

## Nearly half of employers have had layoffs in the past 12 months.

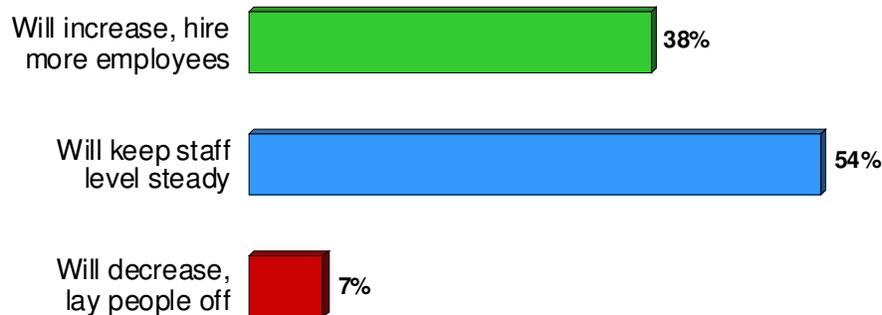
Did your company downsize or lay off any employees over the last 12 months because of the downturn in the economy?



In looking ahead to the next 12 months, 38% of employers expect their organization to increase its staff level by hiring additional employees, and just 7% expect that their organizations will lay people off. The majority (54%) expect their staffing levels to remain steady. Executives whose organizations did not downsize in the past 12 months are more likely to say their organization will increase its staff levels (44% increase, 2% decrease, 54% keep steady) than are those at organizations that laid people off in the past year (31% increase, 13% decrease, 55% keep steady).

## Nearly two in five employers expect to increase staff level in the next year.

Expectations of Company's Staff Level in the Next Year

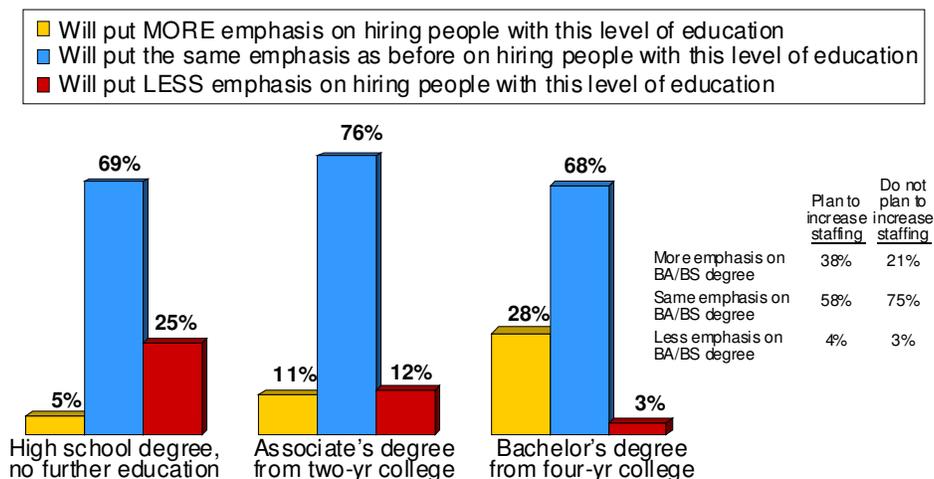


## 2 When it comes to future hiring, employers indicate that their greatest increase in emphasis will be on hiring graduates from four-year colleges.

When asked to think about the emphasis they will place on hiring individuals with various educational degrees in the future compared with the emphasis they placed on hiring people with these qualifications before the economic downturn, employers indicate the biggest shift in emphasis will be away from those who hold a high school degree with no further education and toward those who hold a bachelor's degree from a four-year college.

### Employers expect increased emphasis on hiring people with a bachelor's degree.

Expectations of Company's Emphasis on Education Level of Hirees



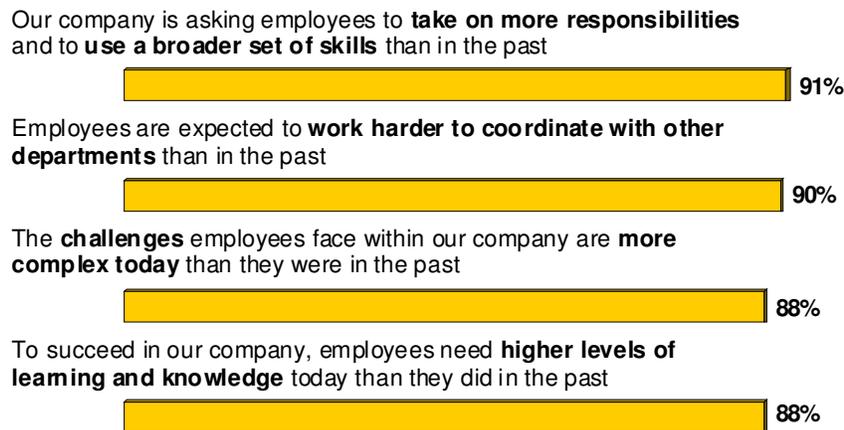
Whereas 25% of employers say they will be placing less emphasis on hiring individuals with a high school degree and just 5% say they will be placing more emphasis, 28% say they will be placing more emphasis on hiring individuals with a four-year college degree and just 3% say they will be placing less emphasis. The proportion who say they will be placing more emphasis on hiring those with a degree from a two-year college but not a four-year college is about equal to those who say they will be placing less emphasis.

Employers at organizations with 500 or more employees (43% more emphasis on hiring those with a four-year degree) are notably more likely than those at organizations with 100 to 499 employees (24% more emphasis) and those with less than 100 employees (17% more emphasis) to say they will place greater weight than they previously did on hiring four-year college graduates. Also, employers who expect their organization to increase staffing levels in the next 12 months are more likely to say their focus on hiring four-year college graduates will increase: among those who expect to increase staffing levels, 38% say they will be placing more emphasis on hiring individuals with bachelor's degrees, compared with 21% among those who do not expect to increase staffing levels.

**3** Employers indicate that, just as the challenges facing their employees are more complex today than in the past, their expectations of employees also have increased. The vast majority of employers say their organizations are looking for employees to use a broader set of skills and have higher levels of learning and knowledge than in the past. Nearly 88% of employers agree that the challenges their employees face within their organization are more complex today than they were before, and a similar proportion say that to succeed in their organization, employees need higher levels of learning and knowledge today than they did in the past.

### Employers' expectations of employees have increased.

*% who agree with each statement*



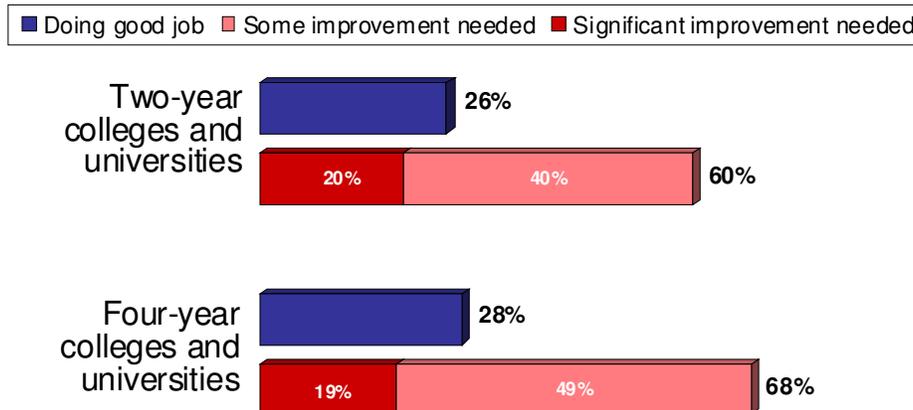
In thinking about what they ask of their employees today compared with in the past, nine in 10 (91%) employers acknowledge that they are asking their employees to take on more responsibilities and to use a broader range of skills. A similar proportion (90%) expect their employees to work harder to coordinate with other departments.

This more complex environment and resulting increased expectations are reported by employers across the board—regardless of the number of employees and whether they experienced layoffs over the past year.

**4** The majority of employers perceive room for two- and four-year colleges to improve their programs to prepare students more effectively for the challenges of today's global economy. Whether they are evaluating the effectiveness of two-year colleges or four-year colleges in preparing graduates for these challenges, executives are twice as likely to say that these institutions need to make improvements in their programs than to say they are doing a good job.

## Employers perceive room for two-year and four-year colleges to improve.

How good a job are our colleges/universities doing in preparing students effectively for the challenges of today's global economy?

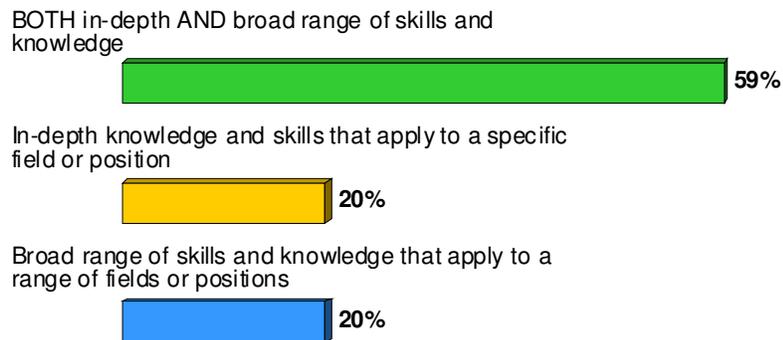


Just over two-thirds (68%) of employers think that improvements are needed in the programs of four-year colleges, but most of them (49%) think some improvements, rather than significant improvements (19%), are needed. Three in five (60%) employers believe that two-year colleges need to make improvements to their programs, including 40% who think some are needed and only 20% who think significant improvements are needed. (An additional 14% are not sure whether improvements are needed at two-year institutions, and 4% are not sure whether improvements are needed at four-year institutions.)

**5** Employers believe that college graduates need to develop *both* a broad range of skills and knowledge *and* in-depth knowledge and skills that apply to a specific field or position. The majority (59%) of executives think that graduates who want to pursue advancement and long-term career success at their organizations need both a broad range of skills and knowledge that apply to a range of fields and positions *and* in-depth knowledge and skills that apply to a specific field or position. The rest are divided on the potential for success with a focus on either in-depth or broad skills and knowledge. One in five employers thinks that a focus on broad skills and knowledge is the path to success. A similar proportion think that graduates' greatest chance for success depends on gaining in-depth knowledge and skills.

## Broad skills/knowledge AND specific skills/knowledge are needed for career success.

Which is more important for recent college graduates who want to pursue advancement and long-term career success at your company?



Regardless of the size of the organization or intent to increase staffing levels in the next year, the majority of executives endorse a combined approach to undergraduate education that yields well-rounded graduates who also have some expertise in a specific field or area of study.

**6** **Employers see a positive benefit in educational innovations that foster active learning and research skills.** They are most positive about the potential value of practices that demonstrate a) students' acquisition of both depth of knowledge in their major and broad skills, b) students' ability to apply their college learning in real-world settings, and c) their development of ability to conduct research and develop evidence-based analysis.

# Employers assess the potential value of emerging educational practices.

*% saying each would help a lot/fair amount to prepare college students for success*

- 84%** Expecting students to complete a significant project before graduation that demonstrates their depth of knowledge in their major AND their acquisition of analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills *(62% help a lot)*
- 81%** Expecting students to complete an internship or community-based field project to connect classroom learning with real-world experiences *(66%)*
- 81%** Ensuring that students develop the skills to research questions in their field and develop evidence-based analyses *(57%)*
- 73%** Expecting students to work through ethical issues and debates to form their own judgments about the issues at stake *(48%)*
- 65%** Expecting students to acquire hands-on or direct experience with the methods of science so they will understand how scientific judgments are reached *(40%)*
- 60%** Expecting students to learn about cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of the United States *(34%)*
- 58%** Expecting students to learn about the point of view of societies other than those of Western Europe or North America *(35%)*
- 50%** Expecting students to take courses that explore big challenges facing society, such as environmental sustainability, public health, or human rights *(28%)*

Employers endorse two other emerging educational practices as ways to help prepare college students for success after graduation, although to a lesser degree. These include practices that demonstrate ethical decision-making (73% a lot or fair amount) and direct experience with the methods of science so they will understand how scientific judgments are reached (65% a lot or fair amount). While somewhat appreciated, three other practices are seen as having less impact: expecting students to learn about cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of the United States (60% a lot or fair amount), expecting them to learn about the point of view of societies other than those of Western Europe or North America (58% a lot or fair amount), and expecting them to take courses that explore big challenges facing society (50% a lot or fair amount).

Few differences exist in the appreciation of these education practices by number of employees, except that executives at smaller organizations are less convinced of the impact of requirements that students learn about cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of the United States and requirements that they take courses that explore the big challenges facing society.

Only one notable difference exists between executives who expect their organizations to be hiring in the next 12 months and those who do not: those who say they will increase their staff levels have greater expectations that requirements for direct experience with methods of science will prepare students for success (73% among those who will increase staff levels vs. 59% among those will not increase staff levels).

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**7** Employers believe that two- and four-year colleges should be placing more emphasis on several key learning outcomes to increase graduates' potential to be successful and contributing members of today's global economy. The learning outcomes that employers perceive to be in need of increased focus range from communication skills to critical thinking and complex problem solving to ethical decision-making to science to the real-world application of knowledge and skills.

Of the 17 learning outcomes tested in the survey, majorities of employers think that colleges should place more emphasis on 15 of them. For eight of these learning outcomes, fully 70% or more of employers think that colleges should place more emphasis on them.

The areas in which employers feel that colleges most need to increase their focus include 1) written and oral communication, 2) critical thinking and analytical reasoning, 3) the application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings, 4) complex problem-solving and analysis, 5) ethical decision-making, 6) teamwork skills, 7) innovation and creativity, and 8) concepts and developments in science and technology.

### Proportion Of Employers Who Say Colleges Should Place More Emphasis Than They Do Today On Selected Learning Outcomes

	<u>%</u>
The ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing	89
Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills	81
The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences	79
The ability to analyze and solve complex problems	75
The ability to connect choices and actions to ethical decisions	75
Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings	71
The ability to innovate and be creative	70
Concepts and new developments in science and technology	70
The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources	68
The ability to understand the global context of situations and decisions	67
Global issues and developments and their implications for the future	65
The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics	63
The role of the United States in the world	57
Cultural diversity in America and other countries	57
Civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement	52
Proficiency in a foreign language	45
Democratic institutions and values	40

When it comes to the skills and knowledge that individuals need to be successful and contributing members of the global economy, employers see less need for colleges to increase their emphasis on understanding democratic institutions and values and proficiency in a foreign language. Many other outcomes fall in between.