

**Colleges, Employers and Employees. How do they feel about Each Other?**

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## **Purpose:**

One of the many strategic plan initiatives both in the UHCC system and here at Kapi`olani Community College is workforce needs. The campus wants to “anticipate and respond to evolving global demands” by “reimagining and expanding partnerships and aligning educational pathways and workforce needs”. To address these priorities, we need to understand what the workforce are saying about new graduates. We also need to understand what new graduates are saying about how prepared they are for the workforce after attending Kapi`olani CC. The purpose of this study is to enlighten the various stakeholders about the issues they face surrounding the workforce.

## **Are College Graduates Ready for the Workforce?**

It's no secret that Generation Z has been called things like “soft, sensitive, difficult to work with, entitled etc [1] [2]. in the professional setting. Some of the reasons why business leaders say they are unprepared is because of poor communication skills and work ethic. There is also general consensus that there are gaps in a recent graduate's skillset and outlook in the workforce and it paints a very telling picture. Business leaders felt that recent graduates had a sense of entitlement, lacked the proper communication skills and office etiquette. The study also cited 51% of business leaders placing the blame on parents, 46% stated educators were the cause of the lack of preparedness and 48% blamed the COVID pandemic as a result of the lack of preparedness.

The business community currently feels that college graduates are lacking in skills and that colleges fail to provide to students during their time in school [1] [3]. Because of the current workforce issues, employers are making serious changes to what positions they hire for and how they get the right person in the door. For example, one study showed that employers say that AI has changed what skills they look for when hiring [2]. The study also stated that Half of employers have dropped degree requirements for entry level jobs. This indicates that AI is coming, and it is coming fast. What employers state time and again is that they need new graduates to come equipped with soft skills [3], [4], [5]. This is something that AI has not been able to bridge at this time. From a technical standpoint this concept is completely logical. One can simply program/engineer a machine/robot to do laborious tasks, but right at this moment, AI cannot address the soft skills in a manner that connects in a positive manner with every single human. For example, most people do not have positive experiences dealing with customer service bots via phone or chat bots. In these examples, callers/customers would almost always want a human to handle their issues. Why? It's because they want empathy, clear communication, creative problem solving and a plethora of other soft skills. According to LinkedIn, some of the most mentioned soft skills mentioned in 2022 job advertisements were as follows: Creativity, persuasion, adaptability, collaboration, time management, teamwork, taking initiative, digital literacy [6]. In 2023 the soft skills mentioned in job advertisements were management, communication, customer service, leadership, sales, project management, research, analytical skills, marketing and teamwork [7]. Kapi`olani CC does offer some opportunities to address some of these soft skills.

## **How do college graduates feel?**

The other side of the story is that recent college graduates say that colleges don't do enough to prepare and develop the soft skills employers are looking for. In one study, only 41% of the grads said their programs taught them skills [8]. “One in four of the grads said soft skills were lacking.” The study also shows that 58% of recent grads say that employers should work more closely with colleges or learning programs. They (49% of graduates) also said that the educational institution should be held accountable for

finding them a job after graduating [8]. The study also showed that new graduates recognize and are worried about AI impacting the workforce. 65% of new grads recognize that they need to upskill their digital and technical skills since the emergence of AI. In addition to feeling like they don't have the necessary skills to succeed in the workforce, 39% of recent grads stated they felt that their institution 'did not prepare them for the "emotional or behavioral impact of the transition to the workplace"' [9].

### **How do employers feel about Colleges?**

As previously mentioned, both graduates and business leaders say that colleges could do more to give recent graduates the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. One study showed that "88% of employers think that it would be either somewhat or very helpful if colleges offered etiquette classes" [1]. For example, majority of the business leaders in the study mentioned that they had a recent college graduate "making an unreasonable salary request (\$100,000)" [1].

Another need that workforce members are pointing out is that colleges need to do more to maintain relationships with people in the industry. The industry feels that smaller and medium sized companies don't have the resources to maintain these relationships with colleges and they feel that there is a real opportunity. To further reinforce this idea, community members feel that college programs that feed into not just an entry level job but a clear-cut career path is what is needed [12]. The most common type of internships that are commonly seen are short term programs that lead only to entry level jobs. Many of these programs often leave people with no way to continue on. Internships with companies that don't have a flat career trajectory are what is needed. Business leaders, and college graduates feel that colleges could do more to establish these relationships.

Another viewpoint employers have about colleges preparing students is that college programs don't keep up with the "needs of employers" [11]. With the increase on technical licenses, professional certifications etc. the workforce needs increasing amounts of training. "The traditional higher educational pathways are often times not well suited to the speed of change or the personal needs and commitments of many working learners" [12].

### **Conclusion:**

Overall there is a general consensus between employers and new graduates that colleges do need to prepare students better for the workforce. What they mean is that colleges need to evolve what they are teaching to keep up with the pace of the workforce. With the exception of highly technical professions in which a specific certification or license is required, employers place less value on the hard skills and place more emphasis on soft skills. With the very real picture that AI will be entering the workforce very soon, more and more emphasis will be placed on soft skills being a major factor when hiring new graduates.

Another thing that needs to be addressed by the college is that the needs of the workforce are rapidly evolving. With A.I., this will only accelerate further. The campus needs to keep up with this rapidly developing situation. Updating curriculum to meet the needs of the workforce (beyond the CTE programs) is vital. Teaching modern techniques and procedures in addition to classical methods has to happen rapidly or the college graduate will be looking for work with an outdated skillset. The more technical a field is, the more this is true. One way to accomplish this is by providing more internship and external training opportunities to students.

Kapi`olani CC has the right idea about reimagining and expanding partnerships and align educational pathways and workforce need. The focus of these initiatives should be to place students in internships and training opportunities that do not lead to jobs with no opportunity for vertical professional growth. If students are placed in short term training programs that pay near minimum wage, the worker will not stay in the profession. The employer will have invested time and money into someone who will not stay very long and the process will need to start all over again.

One other thing that the business community made very clear is that smaller and medium sized companies do not have the capacity to maintain relationships with colleges. These companies do value relationships with colleges and that they feel colleges should do more to reach out to them. If the Kapi`olani Community College is serious enough to put the previously mentioned workforce strategies in the strategic plan, there is no denying that small and medium sized businesses must be in the conversation as well.

Overall the campus has a right idea about the strategic plan workforce initiatives. It provides us an opportunity to further prepare students for what is expected in the workforce. However the focus should be on what business leaders are saying about AI, the pace in which what the campus teaches is evolving too slowly, and the fact that soft skills are a huge factor when hiring a new employee. Employers are willing to drop degree requirements if it means that they don't get the best employee, they get the "Right" employee. They value experience over a degree. With liberal arts constituting a large bulk of degree earners, the campus needs to take a hard look at how these issues are being addressed. One small step in the right direction are more partnerships (which is what is stated in the strategic plan), but it is only the first step.

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