

Durable Skills, Strong Starts: What Employers Really Want from Early- Career Talent

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Durable Skills, Strong Starts: What Employers Really Want from Early-Career Talent

While technical skills, especially AI-specific capacities, are capturing a lot of headlines right now, durable skills and attitudes, distinctly human skills and attitudes, have always been in high demand, appearing on annual top skills lists produced by [LinkedIn](#), [World Economic Forum](#), and other leading organizations. From communication to adaptability, resilience to teamwork, employers and educators alike acknowledge the importance of these durable skills and attitudes to success in early-career roles. For all the attention, though, there is often a lack of clarity about what these skills and attitudes are, how they're developed, and how they are evaluated in real hiring decisions, especially for early-career roles that require little work experience.

The result is a landscape with many lists but little context. One employer might emphasize critical thinking, another collaboration, while others speak vaguely of "fit." Education providers, meanwhile, grapple with how to teach and measure skills and attitudes that are deeply contextual and often personal. With millions of new graduates and early-career workers entering an increasingly complex and disrupted labor market, the stakes are high for employers looking to build strong teams and for education institutions trying to prepare students for success in their first roles.

This study offers a fresh perspective, going beyond identifying which durable skills and attitudes are "in demand." In early summer 2025, with support from Western Governors University, [UpSkill America](#) had the opportunity to dig deeper into durable skills and attitudes to gain a better understanding of how U.S. employers valued and prioritized these capacities in their early-career hires. For the purposes of our research, we use the following definitions:

- **Durable skills** – are enduring skills that are not job/role specific but are valued across all roles and workplaces (teamwork/collaboration, active listening, communication, etc.)
 - For a list of durable skills and their definitions, please see Appendix A.
- **Attitudes** – are the mindsets, personality traits, and philosophies that may be applied on the job.
 - For a list of attitudes and their definitions, please see Appendix B.

Using a web-based survey, we secured over 550 responses from employers across the country, representing all 50 states and every sector, industry, and organization size. We surveyed employers to understand:

- 1) Which durable skills and attitudes they believed were most important for early-career roles, defined as entry-level positions requiring 0-3 years of experience in a field.
- 2) How employers prioritize skills and attitudes differently based on their industries, sizes, and talent philosophies.

In our survey, we asked employers to indicate how important each durable skill and attitude is to their evaluation of early-career candidates on a 5-point scale. We also asked employers how they use and prioritize durable skills and attitudes in hiring decisions and how they believe these skills and attitudes are most effectively developed.

Our findings offer interesting perspectives and point to new opportunities for collaboration between higher education and industry. Among them:

- Employers in our survey were split between hiring primarily for skills required by the role (58%) and hiring for attitudes (42%). Those that have removed degree requirements tend to fall into the latter group. Yet across approaches, most employers value similar core skills and attitudes.
- Employers appear to think about skills and attitudes in clusters rather than as isolated attributes. We found consistent patterns between skills and attitudes that are prioritized together, suggesting some interesting opportunities for education providers to develop more comprehensive learning experiences. Skills associated with being ready to execute on day one of work were the most highly valued by the majority of employers in our study. We call this set of attributes the “Execution and Reliability” core.
- Most employers believe these attributes are developed through experience rather than through coursework. 85% of employers say durable skills are developed through life and work experience, not formal instruction. This perception calls for continued evaluation of how colleges and universities prepare students, and how employers must take some responsibility for creating immersive, real-world learning experiences for those entering the workforce.

This study reveals how employers evaluate early-career talent in practice and highlights some gaps between what they seek and what new early-career employees arrive with on day one. To unpack these insights, we will begin by laying out what employers told us they expect and value in their entry-level hires. We will then define the individual and clustered skills and attitudes that appear to be most and least important for employers. We discuss the differences and similarities we see across industries and organizations of different sizes. Finally, we conclude with discussion of the implications of these findings for educators and employers seeking to nurture talent development.

This piece is the first in a series. We will release additional briefs over the coming months that dive deeper into findings.

Evaluation: How Do Employers Evaluate Durable Skills and Attitudes?

Employers participating in our survey show wide variation in how they approach hiring early-career talent:

- 41.1% state “degrees are required for most roles due to internal policy and organizational practices.”
- 29.6% indicate “degrees are required for most roles for licensing and compliance purposes.”
- 24.2% say “degrees are not required for most or any roles, though our organization usually hires people with degrees.”
- 5.1% report that “degrees are not required for most or any roles, and our organization rarely hires people with degrees.”

Despite these differences in credential requirements, employers tend to agree on where durable skills and attitudes are best developed. A full 85% believe that these skills are primarily gained through work or life experience. Just 12.1% feel they are best cultivated through formal coursework or instruction, while 2.3% believe durable skills are innate and largely unteachable. Similarly, 75% of employers say attitudes are built through life or work experience. Only 10.1% credit formal education, and 15.1% believe attitudes are innate.

To evaluate durable skills and attitudes during candidate assessment and hiring, employers rely on a range of methods:

- 69.2% conduct structured interviews.
- 60% require candidates to complete a skills demonstration.
- 56% use some type of formal assessment.
- 39.2% check references with a specific focus on durable skills and attitudes.
- 19.8% use simulations to observe candidates' skills in real time.

Expectations and Priorities: What Do Employers Want from Early-Career Talent?

We asked employers to indicate what they expected from early-career talent by selecting up to three of the following statements:

Statement	% Selecting
Candidate will demonstrate professionalism, including punctuality, respectful behavior in the workplace, and following organizational norms.	63.7%
Candidate is coachable, willing to accept feedback, eager to learn, and able to apply new skills.	63.4%
Candidate will understand workplace etiquette, including how to communicate effectively with managers, how to behave in meetings, and how to escalate issues appropriately.	40.8%
Candidate will have relevant work experience, either through their college/university or through other employment.	37.8%
Candidate should have experience working as part of a team, contributing to group efforts and resolving minor conflicts productively.	37.6%
Candidate will be able to describe what they know and are able to do, performing adequately in a behavioral interview.	21.8%
Candidate is patient, working through organizational requirements and meeting expectations prior to seeking promotion.	20.8%

From these responses, we can take away some lessons, especially for education providers:

- 1) Perhaps reflecting pandemic-era patterns of isolation and historic low youth employment trends, employers prioritize expectations about punctuality and workplace behaviors that many older workers likely gained through their first jobs as teens. This underscores the need for both educators and employers to not take basic job readiness and awareness of workplace norms for granted, especially among younger learners and workers, and to incorporate these basic expectations into training and experience-building opportunities.
- 2) Coachability is extremely important to employers. Building intentional opportunities for students to gain experience in taking constructive feedback, remaining flexible and adaptable, and adopting the stance of a lifelong learner will be helpful.
- 3) The memes and jokes about young workers asking for promotions within a few months of starting their roles are just that. Employers did not prioritize this, indicating it's not likely a real problem, at least for most

On the whole, it does appear that early-career hires are meeting employers' expectations, though there is room for improvement. Employers have solid confidence in their early-career workforces. When asked whether early-career hires are meeting expectations, 6.9% responded "always," while 50.3% responded "usually." 39.5% responded "sometimes," and only 2.9% said "rarely."

Further, 61% of employers respond "a great deal" or "a lot" when asked to what extent they believe their current early-career workforce has the durable skills and attitudes needed to meet the demands of their organizations over the next five years. Another 33% agree "a moderate amount," while 5% agree "a little."

The Most Valued Durable Skills and Attitudes for Early-Career Hires

Across all surveyed employers, clear patterns emerge in the durable skills and attitudes considered most important for early-career hires. While there is some variation across organizations, the overwhelming priority are skills that emphasize **reliability and execution**.

- **Ethical Behavior/Integrity** – Applying ethical concepts and behaviors to complex situations; acting in alignment with core values even under pressure.
 - 56.3% of respondents rated this skill as "extremely important."
- **Teamwork/Collaboration** – Engaging respectfully and cooperatively with others to achieve shared goals; actively contributing to group success.
 - 55.3% of respondents rated it as "extremely important."
- **Attention to Detail** – Performing tasks with accuracy and precision.
 - 52.4% of respondents rated it as "extremely important."
- **Communication** – Clearly conveying ideas and information; adapting communication style to fit the audience and situation.
 - 51.6% of respondents rated it as "extremely important."

- **Critical Thinking** – Applying logical reasoning to real-world problems; making decisions based on careful analysis.
 - 45.4% of respondents rated it as “extremely important.”

These skills appear to form the backbone of what employers expect from early-career talent and can be considered foundational competencies that employers view as essential for anyone entering the workforce. They are observable, trainable, and closely tied to day-to-day operational success. Regardless of industry context and organization size, we see these skills as employers’ top priorities.

In addition to skills, employers were asked to weigh in on 13 distinct attitudes: mindsets, personality traits, and workplace philosophies. Two stood out sharply. Nearly 60% of respondents identified **trustworthiness**, acting with integrity and earning trust through consistent honesty and reliability, and **responsibility**, taking accountability for actions and for making positive change, as “extremely important.”

Other attitudes ranked as important but with smaller margins:

- **Growth Mindset** – Believing that abilities and intelligence can be developed through learning and effort.
 - 39.5% rated it as “extremely important.”
- **Service Orientation** – Prioritizing the well-being and needs of others; showing empathy and respect.
 - 37.5% rated it as “extremely important.”
- **Emotional Intelligence** – Demonstrating self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management.
 - 35.4% rated it as “extremely important.”
- **Patience** – Remaining calm and respectful in the face of frustration or delay.
 - 34.4% rated it as “extremely important.”

From this, it appears that most employers prioritize what they can observe and assess: execution, dependability, and ethical behavior. Skills and attitudes that are less overt or measurable, while important, appear to be secondary considerations or may be deferred to later stages in an employee’s career. For educators and workforce developers, this insight highlights the importance of sequencing skills development: focusing on building the reliability and execution skills and attitudes that employers demand while introducing growth-oriented skills that become critical for long-term career advancement.:

Skill and Attitude Clusters: What Patterns Do We Observe?

To uncover patterns in how employers prioritize durable skills and attitudes for early-career hires, we conducted a cluster analysis using survey response data. To reach our findings, we mapped co-occurrence of skills and attitudes to identify which skills and attitudes are frequently rated as “extremely important” by the same respondents and identified clusters of skills and attitudes that shared strong co-occurrence patterns. These clusters are the groups of skills and attitudes that employers consistently rate as “extremely important” together.

Five clusters of skills and attitudes emerged from our data. These clusters illustrate how employers naturally group durable skills and attitudes when assessing early-career talent, not as isolated traits, but as connected qualities that reflect broader priorities.

Reliability and Execution

These skills and attitudes appear to represent the **“non-negotiables”** of early-career hiring, expected from day one of employment. As shown above, employers overwhelmingly value skills and attitudes they can observe and which are associated with consistent, dependable performance and execution of role tasks. **Regardless of hiring philosophy, industry, or size, this cluster dominates employer rankings.** Throughout this piece, we refer to this set of skills and attitudes as the “reliability and execution” core. The cluster includes:

- Trustworthiness
- Attention to Detail
- Responsibility
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Ethical Behavior/Integrity

Problem Solving

This cluster centers on structured thinking, cognitive processing, and effective outward communication. It represents the foundation of problem-solving and customer-facing competencies that employers rely on across many professional roles. Whether navigating complex challenges or managing day-to-day interactions, these skills help early-career talent demonstrate both problem-solving capacity and clear, adaptable communication:

- Analytical Thinking
- Creative Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Customer Service

Adaptability and Self-Reflection

This cluster reflects emotional maturity paired with growth potential. These qualities involve both self-awareness — understanding one’s limitations, awareness of one’s own knowledge and strengths, and managing uncertainty — and outward-facing skills such as conflict resolution and advocacy.

We see this cluster prioritized in regulated industries, such as health care and public administration, where navigating complexity and uncertainty is often built into the job and context:

- Humility
- Conflict Mitigation

- Metacognition
- Communication
- Gratitude
- Managing Uncertainty
- Advocacy
- Leadership

Purpose-Driven Persistence and Inclusivity

This cluster combines resilience, social justice orientation, and intellectual curiosity. These are the attributes that support long-term organizational health: fostering cultural contributions, promoting inclusion, and encouraging employees to bring both initiative and adaptability to their roles. Mission-driven organizations and roles that require self-direction, such as non-profits and education employers, are especially likely to emphasize this cluster.

- Justice
- Sense of Purpose
- Optimism
- Empathy/Compassion
- Self-Direction
- Perseverance/Resilience
- Initiative
- Inclusion
- Curiosity/Intellectual Engagement

Service-Minded Emotional Intelligence

This cluster focuses on skills that enable individuals to serve others with patience, responsiveness, and an open mind. Employers working in environments where conditions change rapidly, such as retail and health care, tend to prioritize this cluster. These skills enable employees not just to respond effectively in the moment, but to learn and adapt continuously as expectations and working conditions shift.

- Service Orientation
- Growth Mindset
- Patience
- Flexibility/Adaptability

- Emotional Intelligence
- Active Listening

Groups: What Do We See Across Industries and Organization Sizes?

Employers of all sizes and across every industry share a common focus. They all prioritize the skills and attitudes present in the Reliability and Execution cluster (trustworthiness, attention to detail, responsibility, teamwork/collaboration, and ethical behavior/integrity). Without exception, these capacities are at or near the top of priority lists for all employers.

Beyond these non-negotiables, though, we see skills and attitude priorities emerge that speak to the unique needs and conditions within organizations of different sizes and industries.

Industry

When analyzing skill and attitude prioritization by industry, two consistent drivers stand out: customer interaction and regulatory environments. The specific skills employers emphasize vary depending on whether the industry is people-centered or process-centered.

In customer-intensive sectors like accommodation and food services and retail trade, customer- and communication-centered skills and attitudes dominate. For example, employers in accommodation and food services prioritize:

- Customer Service
- Active Listening
- Communication
- Service Orientation
- Emotional Intelligence

These patterns reflect industries where real-time customer interaction and public engagement are necessary.

Health care reflects similar priorities, where work with the public, often in high-pressure situations, creates a need for great communicators and helpers.

- Communication
- Customer Service
- Active Listening
- Service Orientation
- Patience

Finance employers value a slightly different set of skills and attitudes, prioritizing problem solving, analytic and critical thinking skills, alongside attitudes that contribute to continuous learning:

- Creative Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Growth Mindset
- Service Orientation

Employers in the information and professional, scientific, and technical services industries appear to emphasize skills and attitudes that require employees to both think independently and operate within structured systems:

- Communication
- Analytical Thinking
- Creative Problem Solving
- Initiative
- Growth Mindset

Education employers prioritize a unique set of skills and attitudes, fit for working with young people, in addition to the Reliability and Execution core:

- Active Listening
- Conflict Mitigation
- Creative Problem Solving
- Empathy
- Growth Mindset

Manufacturing and construction round out the picture with a focus on consistency and precision, often done through teams. These employers consistently rate the following attributes as “extremely important:”

- Communication
- Analytical Thinking
- Creative Problem Solving
- Emotional Intelligence
- Growth Mindset

Organization Size

When examining how durable skills and attitudes are prioritized by organization size, patterns emerge that reflect the demands of different organizational scales.

Across all organization sizes, we see shared prioritization of the Reliability and Execution core. In addition to those core attributes, we see interesting patterns:

- Smaller organizations tend to prioritize flexible, people-facing engagement and communication skills and attitudes.
- Larger organizations focus on analytic power alongside customer service.

For smaller organizations with fewer than 100 employees, customer service-focused skills and attitudes hold relatively greater importance. These employers give more weight to interpersonal and client-facing capabilities. Top skills and attitudes in small organizations include:

- Communication
- Customer Service
- Active Listening
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empathy

Smaller organizations depend on employees who can wear multiple hats, fill multiple roles and engage directly with customers. Reliability is still important, but there is a noticeable emphasis on personal interaction.

As organizations grow, priorities evolve, reflecting the core reliability skills noted above. Among organizations with 101–5,000 employees, top-rated skills include:

- Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Analytical Thinking
- Growth Mindset
- Service Orientation

These employers appear to prioritize skills that support risk management, compliance, and internal consistency, alongside customer service.

Large organizations (5,001–25,000 employees) include:

- Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Service Orientation
- Justice
- Emotional Intelligence

This combination suggests that entry-level employees with very large organizations must operate within defined systems, work in teams, and across different cultures and environments.

At the very top of the scale, enterprise-scale organizations (25,001+ employees) prioritize a blend of internal coordination and external service:

- Customer Service
- Communication
- Creative Problem Solving
- Service Orientation
- Growth Mindset

These firms face high stakes in both public perception and internal coordination. They rely on employees who can manage complex internal structures while also delivering consistent, high-quality service to external clients.

Employers' hiring preferences reflect both what the work demands and what the organizational structure can support. In larger, regulated environments, customer-service focused skills may be assumed as baseline rather than explicitly prioritized. In smaller or client-facing settings, those same skills may be make-or-break hiring factors.

These differences create an important consideration for educators and workforce programs: preparing early-career talent must account for organizational scale. One-size-fits-all training strategies can overlook these differences. Effective workforce development programs should help learners understand not just which skills to develop, but also where and how those skills are most valued across different organizational contexts.

Least Prioritized Skills and Attitudes: Insights into What Employers Value Less

While much of our analysis focuses on the durable skills and attitudes employers rate as “extremely important,” it is interesting to examine the skills and attitudes that consistently rank toward the bottom. These lower-priority skills provide insight into what employers deprioritize when hiring early-career talent, and where gaps exist between rhetoric and actual hiring behavior.

While each of the following skills and attitudes may be identified as “extremely important” by a particular industry or by organizations of a certain size, across all survey respondents, the following 10 skills and attitudes emerge as the least prioritized:

- Advocacy
- Gratitude
- Humility
- Metacognition
- Managing uncertainty
- Conflict mitigation
- Empathy/compassion
- Leadership
- Optimism
- Perseverance/resilience

Patterns by Organization Type

When disaggregated by organization type, some variations emerge:

- Public-sector organizations rate skills and attitudes such as leadership, empathy, and perseverance/resilience higher than other sectors. While these skills still fall into the lower-priority range overall, government employers show a relatively stronger emphasis on these qualities.
- Global/multi-national firms and multi-state organizations rate these bottom 10 skills and attitudes as “extremely important” much less often than smaller and more localized organizations, especially metacognition, managing uncertainty, and perseverance/resilience. This pattern suggests that in highly structured and scaled organizations, clarity, reliability, and teamwork take priority over adaptability or introspective traits.

Industry Insights

Human and service-centered sectors emphasize empathy and adaptability, while technical or compliance-heavy sectors prioritize execution and precision:

- Health care and educational services employers show higher prioritization of empathy/compassion and leadership compared to manufacturing, information technology, and wholesale trade.
- Service-heavy industries like retail and accommodations also rate skills like patience and service orientation higher than other industries.

Signals in the Middle

Beyond the least-prioritized skills, several skills consistently appear in the middle of the priority rankings. These include:

- Inclusion
- Growth Mindset
- Initiative
- Curiosity/Intellectual Engagement

These skills in the middle may represent what employers view as “nice-to-have” qualities. They are not necessarily used as hiring filters but could influence selection between equally qualified candidates. For example, inclusion appears particularly important in public administration and education industries.

For curriculum designers and training programs, understanding these patterns is important. Overemphasizing lower-priority skills could misalign program outcomes with real-world expectations. Conversely, ignoring mid-tier skills like growth mindset or initiative could miss an opportunity to prepare candidates for competitive advantage in hiring decisions.

Insights and Opportunities

Employers express clear and consistent preferences when it comes to the durable skills they prize most, but they also reveal contradictions and opportunities that deserve a closer look.

Employers’ top priorities are qualities like trustworthiness, ethical behavior/integrity, attention to detail, teamwork, and responsibility. These attributes, the “Reliability and Execution” core, appear to reflect a desire for employees who can deliver, collaborate, and be counted on from day one. These are the traits that are easiest to observe, interview for, and train to develop. They’re safe bets. We don’t know for sure that employers are prioritizing these skills because they’re easier to assess and observe. However, we think it is reasonable to consider the skills and attitudes that sit lower on the priority list, like empathy, humility, advocacy, and growth mindset. These are the skills and attitudes that help teams grow, not just function. They are also key to leadership and innovation, particularly in the long arc of a career.

Why does this matter? If we only build systems around what’s most observable, we may limit our talent pipelines to those who look the part, not those who are most ready to evolve with the work. That’s a risk, especially in a volatile and complex world where success depends as much on mindset and collaboration as on credentials and checklists.

For employers, hiring for reliability makes sense, but we urge business leaders: Don’t stop there. Think fully about what employees need not to just get in the door, but what they’ll need to grow, and communicate that clearly. For educators, this is a prompt to think differently about what gets taught, what gets measured, and what gets honored in the curriculum. For students, it’s a reminder that some of the most powerful skills they bring to work may not always show up in a job description, but they still matter.

Implications for Stakeholders

For Educators:

- While some students have significant work experience, many do not, and education programs may be the only place some learners gain exposure to workplace norms and employer expectations. Be intentional in building employers' expectations into curriculum alongside durable and technical skills.
- Curriculum design should deliberately layer the core Reliability and Execution cluster with next-stage growth skills (empathy, curiosity, inclusion) as complementary phases in a skills development journey.
- Training and development leaders might adjust their language when engaging employers. Instead of asking what employers value "most," ask: "What skills are critical for getting in the door?" and "What skills are critical for staying and growing in the organization?" Indeed, this is a lesson learned for our next survey!

For Employers:

- Re-evaluate durable skills assessments and rubrics to balance short-term hiring fit with long-term organizational health. Consider integrating structured interviews, simulations, or onboarding programs that surface harder-to-measure attributes.

For Students:

- Focus first on mastering the Reliability and Execution core. These are non-negotiable across the economy. But invest, too, in growth skills like empathy, self-direction, and adaptability. These may not be explicitly requested but will set individuals apart as they grow in their careers.

Conclusion

This analysis provides a portrait of the durable skills and attitudes U.S. employers are really looking for when they hire early-career talent. At the core there is a strong consensus: employers want candidates who are reliable, detail-oriented, honest, and team-minded. The Reliability and Execution cluster, which includes trustworthiness, attention to detail, responsibility, teamwork, and ethical behavior, forms a near-universal baseline among survey respondents. These are seen as non-negotiables for entry-level hires across industries, sizes, and organizational structures.

As we move beyond this baseline, differences appear. Some employers, especially smaller or human-service organizations, elevate interpersonal and growth-oriented attributes like emotional intelligence, curiosity, and service orientation. Others, particularly larger, highly regulated, or multinational firms, double down on execution, often deprioritizing interpersonal and self-reflection skills.

These variations suggest a subtle but important segmentation in how different types of employers think about human potential. The data reveals that skills and attitudes like empathy, inclusion, and humility are rarely

prioritized at the hiring stage. This could reflect practical realities: employers gravitate toward what's easier to assess in interviews. It may also reflect a deeper assumption that some of these traits will emerge later in an employee's development.

Regardless, the message for educators and workforce programs is clear: sequence matters. Begin with mastery of baseline expectations, but don't stop there. Embed opportunities to develop and reflect on the skills and attitudes that support advancement, collaboration, and leadership over the long term.

For employers, there is work to do as well. Hiring for reliability is logical, but long-term success requires broader human capacities. Building systems that support the development and recognition of empathy, adaptability, and initiative can yield powerful returns, not just for individuals, but for teams, culture, and performance.

And for students? The guidance feels remarkably similar to advice students have received for decades. Be the person others can count on. Pay attention. Do good work. Be curious, be kind. And students should nurture their ability to adapt, connect, and work collaboratively. Those are the qualities that will take people from capable to indispensable.

In coming months, we will release briefs that dig deeper into these findings and uncover new insights from the survey data.

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About UpSkill America

UpSkill America, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America's frontline workers. We seek to create a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, higher education institutions, and policymakers working collaboratively to implement education, training, and development strategies that result in better jobs and opportunities for frontline workers, more competitive businesses, and stronger communities. Learn more at www.upskillamerica.org. Follow UpSkill America on [LinkedIn](#).

About Western Governors University

Western Governors University, the nation's leading nonprofit, online university, is transforming higher education to be more student-centric, affordable, accessible to all and relevant to the workforce. Established in 1997 by 19 visionary U.S. governors, WGU creates life-changing pathways to opportunity for those underserved by traditional institutions — working adults, historically underrepresented communities and a diverse, growing number of learners looking for a flexible, online model that better suits their life circumstances. WGU's competency-based education model allows students to demonstrate mastery as they progress through programs at their own pace. Accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, WGU operates in all 50 states and offers more than 112 degrees in health, education, technology, and business. Additionally, WGU provide individual courses and certificates for students preparing to pursue a degree. WGU serves more than 193,000 students nationwide, with more than 401,849 alumni, and has awarded more than 453,438 degrees. Learn more at wgu.edu. Follow WGU on X at [@wgu](https://twitter.com/wgu) and on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/wgu).

Appendix A: Skills and Definitions

- Active Listening - Absorbs information by listening attentively, understanding what is transmitted, and storing information for later purposes.
- Analytical Thinking - Examines information critically and fairly, and solves problems based on that information and in alignment with goals and objectives.
- Attention to Detail - Performs tasks with accuracy and attention to detail.
- Communication - Demonstrates ability to clearly convey ideas and information as appropriate for a given situation; adapts communication style to an audience.
- Conflict Mitigation - Handles disagreements and mediates conflicts in a respectful, appropriate, and impartial manner.
- Creative Problem Solving - Approaches problems with new and different perspectives, strategies, mindsets and data; evaluates the results of creative solutions.
- Critical Thinking - Applies logical reasoning to real-world problems; draws logical conclusions from analysis; makes decisions based on analysis.
- Curiosity/Intellectual Engagement - Approaches opportunities to learn and grow with openness and a desire to understand; seeks learning opportunities proactively and with enthusiasm.
- Customer Service - Supports customer/client needs and expectations.
- Ethical Behavior/Integrity - Applies ethical concepts and behaviors to complex situations; acts in alignment with core values, even in the face of pressure or temptation.
- Flexibility/Adaptability - Demonstrates flexibility in mindsets, behaviors, and plans in response to evolving circumstances
- Inclusion - Promotes belonging by actively welcoming and valuing the contributions of all people; respects differing beliefs, identities, and experiences.
- Initiative - Assesses situations and takes appropriate action and makes decisions without supervision/direction.
- Leadership - Builds a collaborative, inclusive, and positive team culture to meet goals and objectives.
- Communication - Managing Uncertainty - Demonstrate the ability to act and make thoughtful progress in the absence of clarity and in ambiguous conditions.
- Metacognition - Demonstrates awareness and understanding of one's own knowledge, thinking, strengths, and weaknesses; assesses one's own work objectively recognizes and resists one's own cognitive biases.
- Perseverance/Resilience - Demonstrates commitment to goals despite adversity; recovers from setbacks.
- Self-Direction - Demonstrates ownership of one's own learning, consistently pursuing growth; manages time, resources, and commitments with accountability and discipline.
- Teamwork/Collaboration - Engages respectfully and cooperatively with others to achieve shared goals; takes part in activities that benefit the success of a group of colleagues.

Appendix B: Skills and Definitions

- Advocacy - Uses one's voice and position to stand up for oneself and others.
- Emotional Intelligence - Demonstrates social and emotional intelligence skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.
- Empathy/Compassion - Relates to others with emotional understanding and responds with kindness and respect.
- Gratitude - Cultivates appreciation and expresses thanks in ways that strengthen relationships and morale.
- Growth Mindset - Acts with a belief that abilities and intelligence can be gained through learning and hard work, rather than being fixed traits.
- Humility - Recognizes one's own limitations and values the contributions of others.
- Justice - Acts with fairness to ensure equitable treatment of all.
- Optimism - Demonstrates confidence that positive outcomes are possible and that setbacks are temporary and able to be overcome.
- Responsibility - Takes accountability for one's own actions and for making positive change; stands firm in one's values.
- Sense of Purpose - Acts with a sense of mission, aligning actions with values.
- Service Orientation - Prioritizes the well-being and needs of others, showing empathy, respect, and a willingness to contribute meaningfully to individual and collective success.
- Trustworthiness - Acts with integrity and earns the trust of others through consistent honesty and reliability.

Afterword From Breakthroughs to Impact: Redesigning General Education at WGU



At Western Governors University (WGU), we are redesigning General Education to be a launchpad for success in both career and life. Our vision is clear: Every course should equip students with the most in-demand skills employers seek, combining technical expertise with durable human capabilities that set graduates apart.

Why Redesign General Education?

For years, higher education has relied on subject matter experts (SMEs) to determine what graduates need to know. At WGU, we deeply value SME expertise and it remains the foundation of our academic design. Today, we can build on that foundation with powerful insights from workforce intelligence and employer research.

By analyzing millions of job postings, career profiles, and hiring patterns, we can now identify with precision the skills employers value most. These insights confirm what many leaders already know: Success depends not only on technical knowledge, but also on human qualities like communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and principled leadership. With this knowledge, WGU ensures that General Education is designed to prepare students for the realities of the workplace and the opportunities of the future.

How We're Bringing the Redesign to Life

WGU's redesign intentionally integrates three sources of insight: SME expertise, labor market data, and direct employer perspectives. Together, they guide us in creating a model of General Education that is evidence-based, human-centered, and workforce-relevant.

Core Skills for Every Student

Through our partnership with UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute, we learned that employers across the industries WGU serves consistently emphasize a common foundation of skills that distinguish high-performing graduates. These include the ability to act with integrity, work effectively with others, maintain precision, communicate clearly, and think critically.

To make these skills more than abstract terms, we frame them as the kinds of questions every student must be prepared to answer in their careers:

- When faced with pressure, will you choose the right path even when it's the hardest one?
- How do you bring out the best in others while achieving a shared goal?
- What small details could make the difference between good work and excellent work?
- Can you convey your ideas in a way that inspires understanding and action?
- When the answer isn't obvious, how do you analyze, question, and chart the best path forward?

These questions and more will inform the experiences built within WGU's new four-course General Education core. By embedding them into the student experience, we ensure every undergraduate develops the durable capabilities employers value most, skills that prepare them not only for their first role, but for a lifetime of principled growth and leadership.

Targeted Learning for Specific Fields

Employers also identified field-specific skills that vary across industries. A healthcare professional, for example, requires different applied skills than an IT specialist or a business leader. These insights directly shape WGU's domain courses, assessments, and applied learning projects, providing students with targeted preparation for their chosen career paths.

Assessments That Reflect Real Performance

The redesigned model emphasizes performance-based assessments that measure both technical mastery and essential human skills. Reliability, execution, and adaptability are evaluated alongside subject knowledge, ensuring graduates are ready to contribute meaningfully from day one.

Applied and Work-Based Learning

WGU is embedding authentic projects into General Education courses so students can immediately apply what they learn in real-world contexts. These experiences allow students to practice communication, problem-solving, and leadership in ways that mirror professional settings, giving them confidence and competence early in their studies.

The Impact for WGU Students and Employers

With this redesign, WGU positions General Education as more than an academic requirement. It becomes the entry point to a student's professional journey, aligning learning with the skills employers consistently demand. Graduates will leave with both the technical edge to perform their jobs and the human depth to grow as principled leaders over the course of their careers.

By uniting academic expertise, workforce data, and employer voice, WGU is setting a new standard for General Education — one that ensures every student is prepared not just for their first role, but for a lifetime of growth and leadership.

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