



UTAH SYSTEM OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

January 9, 2025

Utah System of Higher Education Workforce Preparedness and Alignment Study

The effectiveness of the Utah System of Higher Education heavily relies on its ability to produce graduates equipped with the skills and knowledge needed by employers. To directly assess the performance and capabilities of USHE graduates from the perspective of employers, Talent Ready Utah led a statewide workforce preparedness study in collaboration with the Cicero Group.

The study, commissioned by USHE, surveyed key industries and delivered actionable recommendations to address skill gaps, expand work-based learning, and foster stronger collaboration between higher education and industry to better align with workforce demands. Over 600 industry leaders participated in in-depth interviews, and roundtable discussions and completed quantitative surveys that informed the study and recommendations.

Key Takeaways:

1. High Demand for Durable Skills

Employers report a widespread need for durable skills such as communication and work ethic. These foundational skills were cited as lacking in recent graduates, presenting a clear opportunity for higher education institutions to enhance their development. Employers also recognize that fostering durable skills requires a collaborative effort between educators and the private sector.

2. Mixed Satisfaction with Technical Skills

While many industries report high satisfaction with the technical skills of recent graduates, others, including aerospace and computer sciences, note that technical skills are often outdated or lack sufficient depth. To address these gaps, the study recommends increased collaboration and use of micro-credentials, certificates, and other non-traditional educational tools tailored to industry needs.

3. Expanding Industry Collaboration on Campus

Employers increasingly desire a stronger presence on campuses, including participation on advisory boards, involvement in curriculum development, and teaching roles for industry professionals. Enhanced collaboration through industry partnerships can expand access to work-based learning opportunities, which make the largest impact on preparing graduates for the workforce.

4. Work-Based Learning Opportunities are Key

Work-based learning programs, such as internships and apprenticeships, significantly improve workforce readiness. Employers highly value practical experience and often prioritize it over formal educational attainment during hiring. However, limited resources and access often constrain employers' ability to expand work-based learning offerings, emphasizing the need for higher education institutions to play a proactive role in developing and promoting these programs.

The study highlights the importance of sustained collaboration between higher education and industry to address current workforce challenges. USHE and its institutions are already integrating this feedback, leveraging innovative educational tools, and expanding work-based learning opportunities—and will continue to build on these efforts to ensure graduates are prepared to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving economy.

The study was guided by a steering committee comprising campus presidents, private sector leaders, and state officials, who sought to define employer expectations, evaluate graduate quality, explore industry-specific needs, and deliver actionable solutions. It reflects feedback from key industries, including healthcare, life sciences, aerospace, computer sciences, financial services, advanced manufacturing, and more.

Steering Committee Members:

President Darin Brush, Davis Technical College

President Mindy Benson, Southern Utah University

Tiffany Lipscomb, VP for Intermountain Health

Joshua Aikens, Chief of Staff for Zonos

Jordan Hill, Director of Workforce Development for Boeing

Jake Hinkley, Director of Workforce Development for Clyde / Sunroc

Sydni Shorter, CEO of the Black Chamber of Commerce

Brad Robeson, CEO of Clean Machine

Jim Grover, Managing Director for GOEO

Vic Hockett, USHE – Associate Commissioner for Talent Ready Utah

Jimmy McDonough, USHE – Asst. Commissioner for Talent Ready Utah

Commissioner's Recommendation

This is an information item only; no action is required.

Attachments

Attachment 1 – Utah Workforce Alignment Study Final Report

Attachment 2 – Workforce Alignment Study Presentation