

## Graduate Employability in a Changing World

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### Abstract

*Graduate employability represents a persistent challenge for educators, employers, and graduates in an evolving labor market shaped by technological change and shifting competency demands. This convergent parallel mixed-methods study examined graduates' perspectives on how higher education institutions can promote employability. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently from graduates of U.S. colleges and universities. Quantitative descriptive statistics were complemented by a conservative descriptive analysis of open-ended responses, following data screening procedures that excluded non-consented and incomplete cases and produced frequency counts of recurring concepts related to employability best practices and barriers. Qualitative frequency counts reflected similar priorities and highlighted structural barriers related to time constraints and access to experiential opportunities. Findings provide evidence-based insights to inform faculty and institution-level strategies that embed employability within curricula and advising practices, while supporting self-directed learning and long-term career adaptability. By grounding employability strategies in graduates' reported experiences, this study extends existing employability frameworks with empirically derived priorities that inform institutional design and strategic planning.*

**Keywords:** *employability, career readiness, self-directed learning, mentoring, experiential learning, higher education*

### 1. Introduction

The persistent challenge of promoting graduate employability intersects with scholarship, society, and economic policymaking. Despite ongoing efforts to improve academic quality, many graduates struggle to transition effectively from academia to professional settings. This pattern suggests a need for systemic pedagogic change, defined as integrating employability criteria into curriculum and institutional mission rather than treating employability as an add-on [1], [2]. Such integration reframes employability as a continuous developmental outcome supported throughout a degree program through instructional and advising practices.

Although employability is increasingly framed as an indicator of institutional effectiveness, research suggests that integration of employability strategies into institutional goals, plans, and practices remains underexplored [3], [4]. Institutions may continue to emphasize retention and graduation while paying less attention to workforce alignment and transferable skills. Aligning learning outcomes with employer-desired competencies is central to embedding employability strategies [4].

Emerging research highlights psychosocial and developmental dimensions of employability, including motivation, self-efficacy, resilience, peer support, and mentoring relationships that strengthen persistence and professional identity [5], [3], [6]. These insights suggest that employability extends beyond technical skill acquisition and includes psychological readiness and social support mechanisms.

This topic aligns with human capital theory, which emphasizes skills and knowledge as economic assets [7], [8], [9], and social cognitive career theory, which highlights self-efficacy in career development behaviors [10]. Skill adaptability and applied experience are critical for employability in changing labor markets [11], and human and social capital further reinforce the importance of institutional learning and professional networks [12]. Digital literacy and technological fluency are increasingly associated with employability outcomes [13], [14].

The purpose of this convergent parallel mixed-methods study was to examine how educational institutions can promote graduate employability amid ongoing labor-market transformation. The central research question guiding this study was: How can educational institutions promote graduate employability? Drawing on graduates' post-completion perspectives, this study identified institutional practices, curricular strategies, and support mechanisms that graduates perceived as most effective in fostering career readiness. By centering graduate experiences, the study sought to address gaps in existing research on how employability strategies are implemented and experienced in higher education contexts.

Garrison's self-directed learning framework informed the conceptual foundation of this study [15]. The model emphasizes self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation as essential in sustained

learning and adaptation [15]. Self-directed learning supports continuous skill development and adaptability, which are essential for workplace competence in dynamic labor markets [16]. A lifelong learning mindset requires pedagogy that supports learner autonomy and reflective practice [17], [15].

## 2. Literature review

Existing scholarship supports lifelong learning and mentoring as key elements of employability readiness. Gray [18] emphasized that lifelong learning begins early and continues into adulthood, reinforcing the need for pedagogies that foster adaptability, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Experiential learning is frequently identified as a mechanism for translating academic knowledge into workplace competence [2], [18].

Mentorship is also linked with improved academic persistence and employability outcomes, particularly when mentoring relationships are embedded within instructional and advising roles. Structured mentoring programs have been associated with higher graduation rates, career confidence, and workplace readiness [19, 20]. Faculty and faculty advisors, through sustained instructional interaction and individualized guidance, play a central role in facilitating access to social capital, professional norms, and career-relevant feedback. Even interaction with a single faculty member can strengthen student persistence and commitment to degree completion [21].

Martins and Faciola described mentoring maps that help individuals visualize developmental networks and identify gaps in professional support [22]. Mentorship and individualized development are increasingly formalized through institutional plans and Individual Development Plans required by federal agencies [22].

Research also highlights persistent gaps in competencies that influence employability outcomes. Higher education instructors have expressed concerns about graduates' writing, critical thinking, and readiness to engage with complex work demands [23]. Employer perspectives further emphasize the importance of problem-solving abilities and demonstrable competence over credential attainment alone [18]. Together, these findings reinforce the multidimensional nature of employability, encompassing cognitive, psychosocial, and experiential components and requiring alignment between instructional practices and workplace expectations.

While institutions increasingly acknowledge employability as a strategic priority, clear and standardized measures of college and career readiness remain underdeveloped [19]. As a result, employability initiatives are often implemented without systematic evaluation or alignment across curricula, advising, and career services.

This lack of clarity in measurement complicates institutional accountability. Without shared indicators of employability outcomes, institutions may struggle to assess whether curricular and co-curricular interventions meaningfully support graduate readiness. Research suggests that embedding employability requires intentional alignment between learning outcomes, instructional practices, and institutional support structures rather than reliance on discrete or optional programs [3], [4]. These findings reinforce the need for empirical research that captures graduate perspectives on which institutional strategies are perceived as most effective in supporting employability.

## 3. Methodology

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently through a single survey instrument and analyzed separately, followed by comparison to identify convergence. Although quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, the quantitative strand served as the primary analytic component, with qualitative findings providing contextual support and elaboration.

Data collection commenced after approval from the University of Phoenix Institutional Review Board. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants prior to survey completion. Respondents were informed that participation was anonymous and that no identifying information, including IP addresses, would be collected. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time by exiting the survey prior to submission. Data were stored securely and retained in accordance with institutional research data-management protocols.

Participants were recruited through SurveyMonkey Audience, a web-based panel of adults. The target population included U.S. graduates of four-year higher education institutions aged 21 or older. Although SurveyMonkey Audience provides access to verified adult respondents, the panel-based sampling approach may limit generalizability beyond populations with similar levels of educational attainment and labor-market experience.

The survey included 11 Likert-type items assessing perceived institutional and instructional strategies that support employability, two open-ended questions about best practices and challenges, and demographic items. The full survey instrument, including all Likert-type items and open-ended questions, is available upon request to support transparency and replication.

For this study, key terms were defined for participants at the beginning of the survey to promote consistent interpretation of item wording. Career readiness was defined as equipping graduates with the

skills, mindset, and practical experience needed to excel in their chosen professions. Faculty was defined as an instructor or professor in a four-year higher education institution. Faculty advisor was defined as a faculty member in a four-year higher education institution who directly supervises a graduate student's thesis or dissertation research. These definitions were provided in the survey instructions and applied to all subsequent items that referenced career readiness, faculty, or faculty advisors.

### 3.1. Data screening and cleaning

A total of 429 responses were collected. Of those, 410 respondents accepted informed consent. Responses without consent were excluded. Consented responses were screened for completion of all 11 quantitative items; incomplete quantitative responses were removed rather than imputed, resulting in a final analytic sample of 380 complete and consented cases. Likert responses were coded on a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). This screening process ensured analytic consistency across quantitative and qualitative strands by retaining only complete, consented cases for all reported analyses.

### 3.2. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. Qualitative responses were analyzed using a conservative descriptive thematic approach focused on surface-level content. Responses were reviewed in their entirety, and recurring concepts were identified through keyword and phrase matching to minimize subjective inference.

## 4. Results

The study sample included 380 graduates who accepted informed consent and completed all 11 quantitative survey items. Participants ranged in age, with the largest proportions between 30 and 44 years and 45 and 60 years. Slightly more than half of the respondents identified as female. A majority of participants reported holding a graduate degree. These characteristics indicate that the sample consisted primarily of mid-career, degree-holding adults who were positioned to reflect on their employability and career readiness following higher education.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (n = 380)

| Variable | Category | Percentage |
|----------|----------|------------|
| Gender   | Female   | 51.84      |
|          | Male     | 48.16      |
| Age      | 18-29    | 8.68       |
|          | 30-44    | 37.89      |

| Variable       | Category | Percentage |
|----------------|----------|------------|
|                | 45-60    | 36.05      |
|                | 60+      | 17.37      |
| Highest degree | College  | 38.16      |
|                | Graduate | 61.84      |

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the final analytic sample after data screening and cleaning procedures were applied.

### 4.1. Quantitative results

Mean scores ranged from 4.03 to 4.36, indicating overall agreement that each strategy contributes to graduate employability. The highest mean score was observed for connecting curriculum to careers, followed closely by teaching critical thinking and adaptability, incorporating real-world applications, and encouraging internships or employment. The relatively small standard deviations across items suggest moderate variability in responses, indicating general consistency in graduates' perceptions of employability-promoting practices. Table 2 summarizes descriptive statistics for the 11 Likert-type items assessing graduates' perceptions of institutional and instructional strategies that promote employability.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Employability Strategy Items (Likert 1-5)

| Item                                     | M    | SD   |
|------------------------------------------|------|------|
| Connect curriculum to careers            | 4.36 | 0.75 |
| Communicate importance of networking     | 4.20 | 0.85 |
| Connect course concepts to careers       | 4.22 | 0.81 |
| Teach critical thinking and adaptability | 4.26 | 0.85 |
| Incorporate real-world applications      | 4.25 | 0.80 |
| Share value of professional groups       | 4.11 | 0.90 |
| Encourage internships                    | 4.25 | 0.81 |
| Coach self-awareness and goals           | 4.17 | 0.87 |
| Refer students to career resources       | 4.06 | 0.90 |
| Offer career readiness programming       | 4.23 | 0.85 |
| Support professional connections         | 4.03 | 0.96 |

Note. Likert response options ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Only complete and consented responses were included in the analysis.

It is important to note that Items 1 through 9 explicitly assessed graduates' perceptions of faculty and faculty advisor contributions to employability through instructional, advising, and mentoring practices. In contrast, Items 10 and 11 addressed institutional-level support. The highest mean scores were observed on items related to faculty-mediated practices, including connecting curriculum to careers, teaching critical thinking and adaptability, incorporating real-world applications, and encouraging internships or employment. This pattern suggests that graduates most strongly associate employability development with instructional and advising interactions rather than with centralized institutional programming alone.

Items related to curriculum–career alignment demonstrated the highest levels of endorsement. The item connecting curriculum to careers yielded the highest mean score, indicating that graduates perceived explicit linkage between academic content and career pathways as a central employability mechanism. Similarly, items addressing the teaching of critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, as well as the incorporation of real-world applications into instructional feedback and discussions, received high mean scores with relatively low variability. These findings suggest a broad consensus that employability is strengthened when academic learning is explicitly connected to practical and transferable skill development.

Experiential learning and applied experience were also strongly endorsed. Items encouraging internships or part-time employment and offering institutional career readiness programming, such as career fairs and job-search support, demonstrated high mean scores, indicating that graduates valued structured opportunities to engage with professional environments during their academic programs.

Items related to mentorship, networking, and professional engagement exhibited slightly greater variability but remained overall positively endorsed. Graduates agreed that communication about professional groups, mentorships, and networking opportunities supported employability, though these items displayed marginally higher standard deviations. This pattern suggests some variation in graduates' access to or experience with these supports across institutions.

## 4.2. Qualitative results

Two open-ended questions were included in the survey instrument to capture graduates' perspectives on employability in their own words:

Question 12: What best practices can be used to promote graduate employability?

Question 13: What challenges interfere with promoting graduate employability?

Only responses from participants who accepted informed consent and completed the survey were included in the qualitative analysis. A total of 306 respondents provided usable responses to Question 12, and 292 respondents provided usable responses to Question 13.

## 4.3. Qualitative analysis procedure

Qualitative responses were analyzed using a conservative descriptive thematic approach. Responses were reviewed in their entirety, and recurring concepts were identified through keyword and phrase matching to minimize subjective inference. Coding focused on surface-level content rather than latent interpretation. Each response could be counted in more than one category if it referenced multiple concepts. Frequencies reflect the number of responses in which a concept appeared at least once. This approach was selected to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and alignment with the study's descriptive aims.

**4.3.1. Best practices for promoting graduate employability (Question 12).** Analysis of responses to Question 12 identified five primary categories of best practices. Experiential learning was the most frequently referenced category, appearing in 77 responses. Participants commonly cited internships, hands-on learning opportunities, and applied projects as mechanisms that supported career readiness. Skill development was the second most frequently referenced category, with 34 responses emphasizing transferable competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and technical proficiency.

Mentorship and networking were mentioned in 28 responses, highlighting the perceived value of guidance from faculty, alumni, or industry professionals. Curriculum–career alignment was referenced in 25 responses, indicating the importance graduates place on coursework that clearly connects academic content to workplace applications. Career services and job-search support, including resume assistance and interview preparation, were referenced less frequently, appearing in 11 responses.

Table 3. Best Practices for Promoting Graduate Employability (n = 306)

| Category                                                 | No. of Responses |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Experiential learning (internships, hands-on experience) | 77               |
| Skill development (soft and technical skills)            | 34               |
| Mentorship and networking                                | 28               |
| Curriculum-career alignment                              | 25               |
| Career services and job-search support                   | 11               |

Note. Frequencies reflect the number of responses in which a category was referenced at least once. Individual responses may be represented in multiple categories.

Collectively, these results indicate that graduates most frequently associate employability with opportunities to apply learning in practical contexts, supported by skill development and professional guidance. The frequency distribution suggests that experiential and applied learning strategies are perceived as more influential than standalone career services. Table 3 summarizes the frequency with which each category appeared across responses.

**4.3.2. Challenges interfering with graduate employability (Question 13).** Responses to Question 13 revealed five recurring categories of challenges. Time constraints and competing responsibilities were the most frequently cited barriers, appearing in 36 responses. Participants often referenced balancing academic demands with employment, family responsibilities, or other personal obligations. Limited access to experiential opportunities was the second most frequently cited challenge, with 31 responses noting difficulties securing internships, hands-on experiences, or professional placements.

Labor market conditions were referenced in 18 responses, reflecting concerns about job availability, competition, and broader economic factors. Financial constraints appeared in 10 responses, often in relation to unpaid internships or the cost of pursuing additional training. Perceived gaps in institutional support were noted in 8 responses, suggesting variability in access to career guidance and employability resources.

Table 4. Challenges Interfering with Graduate Employability (n = 292)

| Category                                        | No. of Responses |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Time constraints and competing responsibilities | 36               |
| Limited access to experiential opportunities    | 31               |
| Labor market conditions                         | 18               |
| Financial constraints                           | 10               |
| Insufficient institutional /support             | 8                |

Note. Frequencies reflect the number of responses in which a category was referenced at least once. Individual responses may be represented in multiple categories.

Table 4 summarizes the challenges respondents reported as interfering with the development of graduate employability.

#### 4.4. Convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings

Integration of quantitative and qualitative results demonstrated clear convergence. Quantitative findings indicated strong agreement on the importance of curriculum–career alignment, experiential learning, skill development, and institutional support. Qualitative responses reinforced these findings by identifying experiential learning, skill development, and mentorship as the most frequently cited best practices, while also highlighting structural barriers such as time constraints and limited access to experiential opportunities. The quantitative ratings and qualitative frequency counts indicate alignment between graduates' numerical evaluations of employability strategies and the concepts most frequently referenced in open-ended responses. This convergence supports the interpretation that graduates' numerical ratings and narrative responses reflect consistent priorities regarding how employability is developed and constrained within higher education.

#### 5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that graduate employability is most strongly supported through faculty- and faculty advisor-mediated practices that intentionally connect academic learning to professional contexts. Across the quantitative items, graduates reported the highest levels of agreement with practices enacted directly through instruction and advising, including connecting curriculum to careers, teaching critical thinking and adaptability, incorporating real-world applications, and encouraging participation in internships or employment. These findings suggest that employability development is experienced by graduates primarily through sustained interactions with faculty and faculty advisors, rather than solely through centralized institutional programming. While institutional-level support such as career fairs, internships, and skills badges were positively endorsed, graduates' responses suggest that these supports are most impactful when reinforced through faculty guidance and curricular integration.

From a human capital perspective, the prominence of experiential learning and transferable skill development reflects graduates' perceptions that employability depends on opportunities to acquire and apply practical competencies. Human capital theory emphasizes the accumulation of skills and experience as key drivers of economic value and adaptability [7, 8, 9]. The findings suggested that graduates perceive institutions as most supportive when they facilitate applied learning experiences that translate academic

knowledge into workplace-relevant capabilities, thereby strengthening workforce readiness.

Results also align with social cognitive career theory, particularly regarding mentorship, self-efficacy, and career confidence [10]. Graduates' emphasis on mentoring relationships and professional guidance highlights the role of self-efficacy in navigating career transitions [10]. Mentorship appears to function not only as academic support but as a mechanism for building confidence, persistence, and clarity around career pathways. These results are consistent with prior research identifying mentoring as a critical contributor to career readiness and professional development [19, 20, 6].

Self-directed learning offers an additional interpretive lens for understanding the findings [15]. Graduates' emphasis on self-awareness, goal setting, and adaptability suggests that employability extends beyond institutional offerings to include learners' capacity to manage their own development. Garrison's [15] model emphasizes self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation as foundational elements of lifelong learning, which are increasingly necessary in dynamic labor markets [16]. The findings indicate that institutions can promote employability by fostering learning environments that support autonomy, reflection, and continuous skill development, preparing graduates to adapt beyond their initial employment outcomes.

The challenges identified by respondents further contextualize the employability landscape. Time constraints, limited access to experiential opportunities, and financial barriers suggest that even well-designed institutional strategies may be unevenly accessible. These constraints highlight the importance of considering equity and access when implementing employability initiatives, particularly for students balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Addressing these structural barriers may be essential for ensuring that employability-focused practices benefit a broad range of learners. The findings illustrate that both individual circumstances and structural constraints influence barriers to employability. The frequency patterns suggest that, even when institutions offer employability-focused initiatives, external factors, such as time availability and access to experiential learning, may limit student participation.

Promoting graduate employability requires an integrated institutional approach that combines curriculum design, experiential learning, mentorship, and support for self-directed development. Employability emerges not as a singular outcome but as an ongoing process shaped by both institutional structures and individual agency. By aligning academic practices with these principles, higher education institutions can better prepare graduates to navigate complex, evolving career pathways.

## 6. Limitations

This study's reliance on self-reported perceptions and cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Results may not generalize beyond the survey panel sample. Because qualitative analysis focused on surface-level content and frequency counts, findings emphasize the prevalence of reported concepts rather than the depth of individual narratives, consistent with the study's descriptive analytic intent.

## 7. Implications for practice

Persistent concerns exist among employers, educators, and the public regarding graduates' preparedness for professional environments [24, 18]. Addressing employability, therefore, requires institutions to move beyond isolated career preparation initiatives and toward integrated pedagogical and structural approaches that align academic learning with evolving workplace expectations [1, 2]. Institutions should embed employability across academic programs, expand experiential learning opportunities, systematize mentorship and networking, and align career services with instructional practice to support sustained employability outcomes. These implications reflect graduate-reported perceptions rather than direct measures of institutional effectiveness. Beyond institutional implications, this study's findings contribute to broader societal discussions about the role of higher education in workforce development and economic resilience. As labor markets continue to evolve, employability increasingly encompasses adaptability, continuous learning, and the capacity to navigate change rather than preparation for a single occupational pathway. By identifying strategies that graduates perceive as effective, this study offers evidence to inform institutional and policy-level efforts to align educational systems with workforce needs while maintaining academic rigor and developmental integrity.

## 8. Conclusion

This mixed-methods study contributes to existing literature with evidence-based insights from seasoned graduates of higher education institutions. Findings provide a roadmap for stakeholders and policymakers to promote graduate employability through integrated pedagogy, experiential learning, mentorship, and institutional support structures. By integrating graduate perspectives across quantitative and qualitative data, the study highlights employability as a developmental process shaped by curriculum design, experiential learning, and institutional support structures.

## 9. References

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