

A photograph of three students in a classroom setting, focused on their laptops. The student in the foreground is a young woman with long, wavy red hair and glasses, wearing a beige ribbed sweater. Behind her are two young men, one with curly brown hair and another with short dark hair, both looking at their screens. The background shows a window with a view of trees. A yellow triangle is in the top right corner.

# Work-Based Learning In Postsecondary Education

Results of a  
National Survey

*This study produced with  
support from*

**ECMC**  
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**EdWeek**  
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# About Editorial Projects in Education

Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Its primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. EPE covers local, state, national, and international news, and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education publishes Education Week, America's newspaper of record for precollegiate education, EdWeek Market Brief, and the Top School Jobs employment resource. It also produces periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and EdWeek Market Brief. The center also conducts independent research studies for external clients including for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

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[ECMC Foundation](#) supports Education Week's coverage of preparing students for life and the workforce. The Foundation invests in initiatives to improve higher education for career success among underserved populations through evidence-based innovation.

## Key Contributors | REPORT

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# Table Of Contents

About This Report	1
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Respondent Profile	6
High-Interest Programs	6
Program Availability and Gaps	9
Resources and Institutional Capacity	12
Employer Partnerships and Outlook	16
Conclusion	19

## Executive Summary



**W**ork-based learning is expanding across postsecondary institutions, but educators say growth is uneven and resources are not keeping pace.

Results from a national survey—conducted by the EdWeek Research Center of 646 postsecondary educators involved in work-based learning programs—indicate strong and growing student demand for job-aligned pathways, particularly in technology-focused fields.

Nearly 6 in 10 respondents (58%) say student interest in work-based learning has increased over the past five years. Most respondents say their institutions currently offer work-based learning in digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity (55%) and education (52%). A substantial share of respondents report that they offer a range of programs in other fields, such as management

and entrepreneurship (44%), health services (42%), and construction (41%).

Students appear to be motivated by more than job placement: the most common reasons they pursue work-based learning, according to educators responding to the survey, are genuine interest in a career path (58%) and a desire to advance in areas where they are already working or interning (47%).

But institutional capacity doesn't always keep pace with demand. More than half of respondents (54%) say their institution's investment in work-based learning is smaller than its investment in traditional academics, and only 10% say it is a lot larger. Additionally, a third of respondents say resources and programming for work-based learning have declined over the past five years, citing overall funding declines (46%) and decreasing student enrollment (29%) as the top reasons.

## Executive Summary

Educators also see room for improvement in what they already offer. When asked to assign a letter grade to the overall quality of their institution's work-based learning programs, only 20% gave their programs an A. The largest share (44%) gave their programs a B and nearly 3 in 10 (29%) said they earn a C.

When it comes to program decision-making, institutions are responsive to enrollment shifts and to employers. More than half of educators (53%) say they evaluate enrollment trends when making decisions about changes to workforce learning programs and 51% respond to specific requests from area employers, but only 25% survey students about offerings they would like to see.

Postsecondary educators have ideas about what would help. When asked what would lead to major improvements in work-based learning at their institutions, they pointed to stronger employer partnerships (61%), additional funding for courses and pathways (46%), and more resources for facilities and equipment (37%).

Seven in ten educators expect the number and variety of work-based learning programs to grow over the next five years, and more than three-quarters expect their institution's overall emphasis on work-based learning to increase. That optimism, however, sits alongside a recognition of what scaling requires.

Educators at postsecondary institutions see workforce learning not as peripheral, but central to their mission. Scaling high-quality, employer-connected programs requires sustained investment in infrastructure, coordination, and partnership capacity. Student demand alone will not be enough.

**More than half of educators (53%) say they evaluate enrollment trends when making decisions about changes to workforce learning programs.**

## Introduction

For decades, a college degree was widely viewed as the surest path to economic mobility. That consensus is shifting. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey found that 49% of adults believe a four-year degree is less important for landing a well-paying job than it was [20 years ago](#). College enrollment fell 15% between 2010 and 2021, even as the majority of students said they were open to alternatives like community college, on-the-job training, or [career and technical education](#).

As public confidence in traditional higher education has eroded, pressure has mounted on postsecondary institutions to demonstrate practical value. *The College Board* announced in early 2026 that it was expanding into career exploration and work-based learning, driven by rising student demand [for job-related skills](#). Workforce readiness has emerged as a rare area of [bipartisan interest](#), with lawmakers from both parties supporting expanded apprenticeships and stronger connections between education and employers, even as they disagree on the federal government's role in delivering on that vision.

Additionally, senior executives from companies including Google, IBM, and Microsoft have called on educators to provide [more meaningful](#), work-oriented

learning experiences, pointing to [gaps in both technical and interpersonal skills](#) among younger workers.

Much of the national conversation has focused on K-12 career and technical education. A recent EdWeek Research Center survey found that 75% of K-12 educators said their schools plan to offer [more work-based learning opportunities](#) in the next five years. But postsecondary institutions are where many of these pathways lead. Community colleges, technical colleges, and universities are expected to deliver the credentials, employer partnerships, and work-based training that labor markets demand. Those institutions face challenges in delivering.

In a response to an open-ended survey question, a professor from New Hampshire pointed to a lack of funding and support:

“COVID killed a lot of the successful programs. Cuts to university funding have made it worse. There are efforts to rejuvenate these programs, but they are poorly funded and supported by the administration.”

A survey respondent working with a New York theatre program cited similar concerns:

“Even though there is data proving the success of work[-]base[d] learning ... four-year higher education institutions still do not place a high enough priority to invest in it.”

## ABOUT THE SURVEY



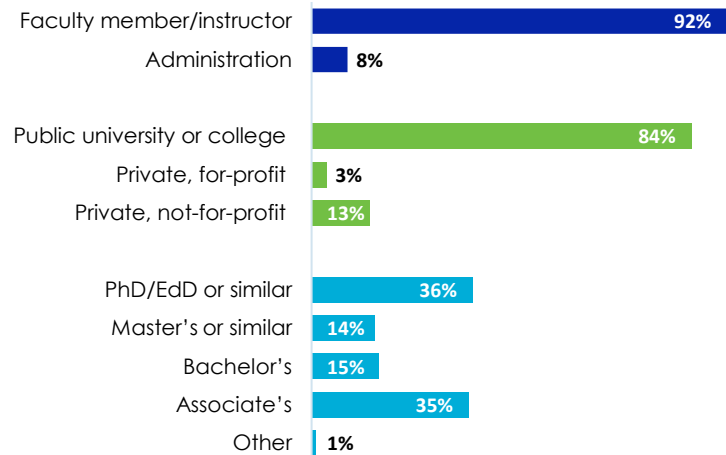
## Respondent Profile

The majority of survey respondents (92%) identify as postsecondary faculty members or instructors, with the remaining 8% identifying as administrators.

Half of respondents (50%) work at institutions where the highest degree offered is a master's or above, including 36% at doctoral-granting institutions. The remaining half are roughly split between institutions offering bachelor's degrees (15%) and those where an associate's degree is the highest credential offered (35%).

Figure 1

### Demographics: job role, type of university, degrees offered



## High-Interest Programs

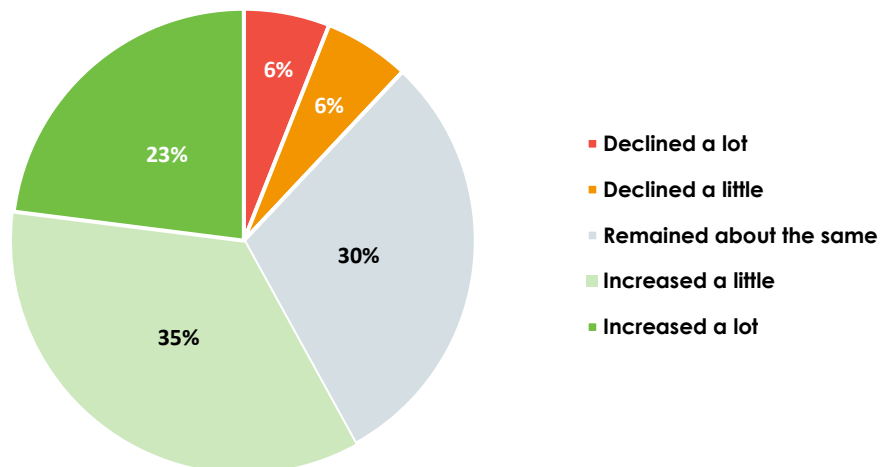
Student interest in work-based learning has grown steadily across postsecondary institutions. Nearly 6 in 10 educators (58%) say student interest has increased over the past five years, with 23% saying it has increased a lot. Only about 1 in 8 (12%) report a decline.

That interest is not spread evenly across fields. Digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity is the area where educators most commonly offer work-based learning

today (55%), followed by education (52%), management and entrepreneurship (44%), health and human services (42%), and construction (41%). But program offerings aren't limited to a few top fields. At least a quarter of respondents say their institutions provide programs in six other categories, including advanced manufacturing and public service, government, or safety.

Figure 2

**In the past five years, our students' level of interest in work-based learning has:**



## High-Interest Programs

(continued)

Looking ahead, digital technology remains the field in which workforce educators most expect to introduce programs at their institutions, with 41% anticipating new offerings there in the next five years, well ahead of any other category. Health and human services (22%) and

advanced manufacturing (20%) follow. At least 10 percent expect to introduce programs in 11 other fields including education (19%), public service (17%), hospitality (16%), construction (16%), and management and entrepreneurship (16%).

Figure 3

Select all that apply. CURRENTLY, my institution offers work-based learning related to the following fields:

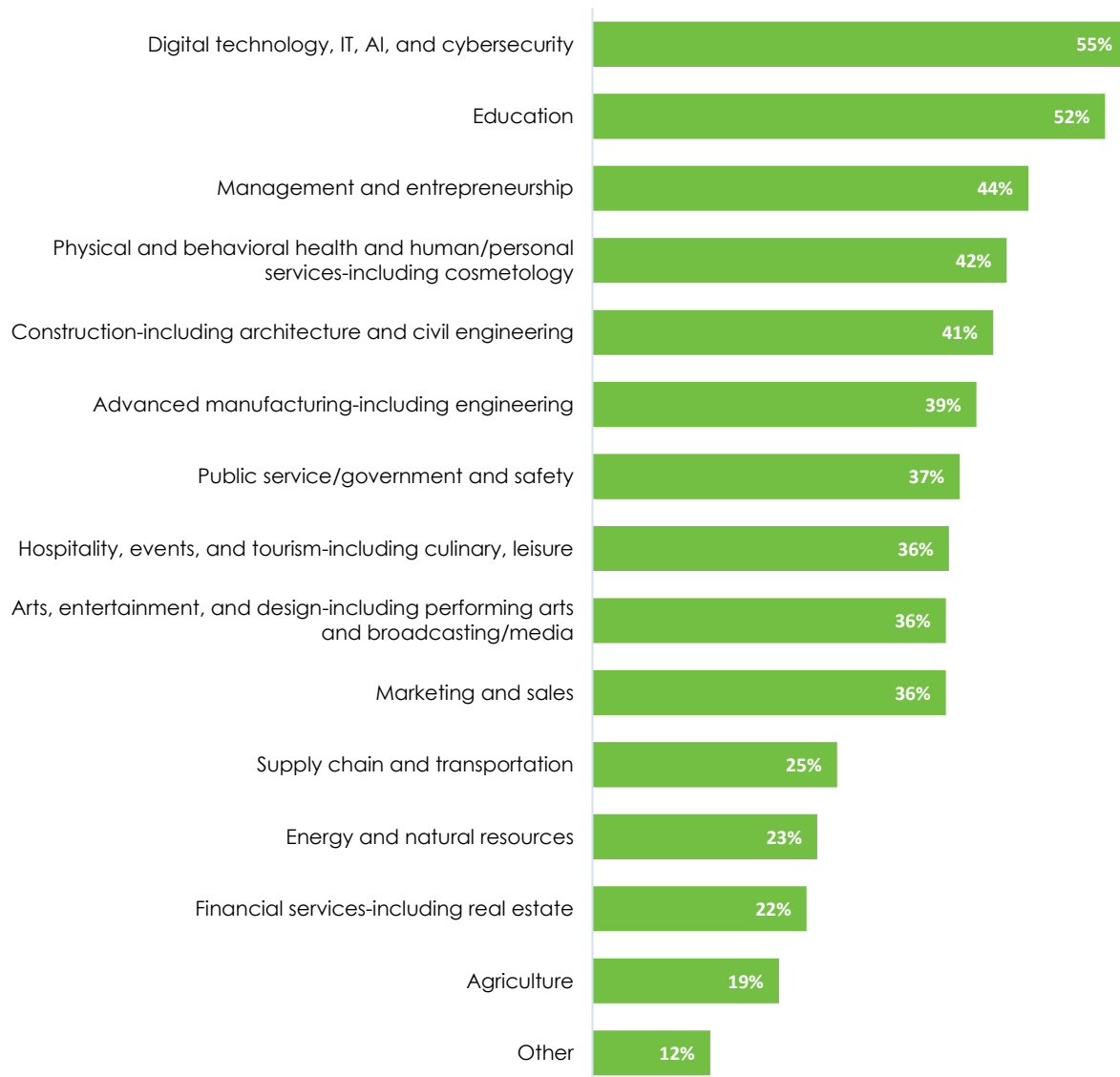
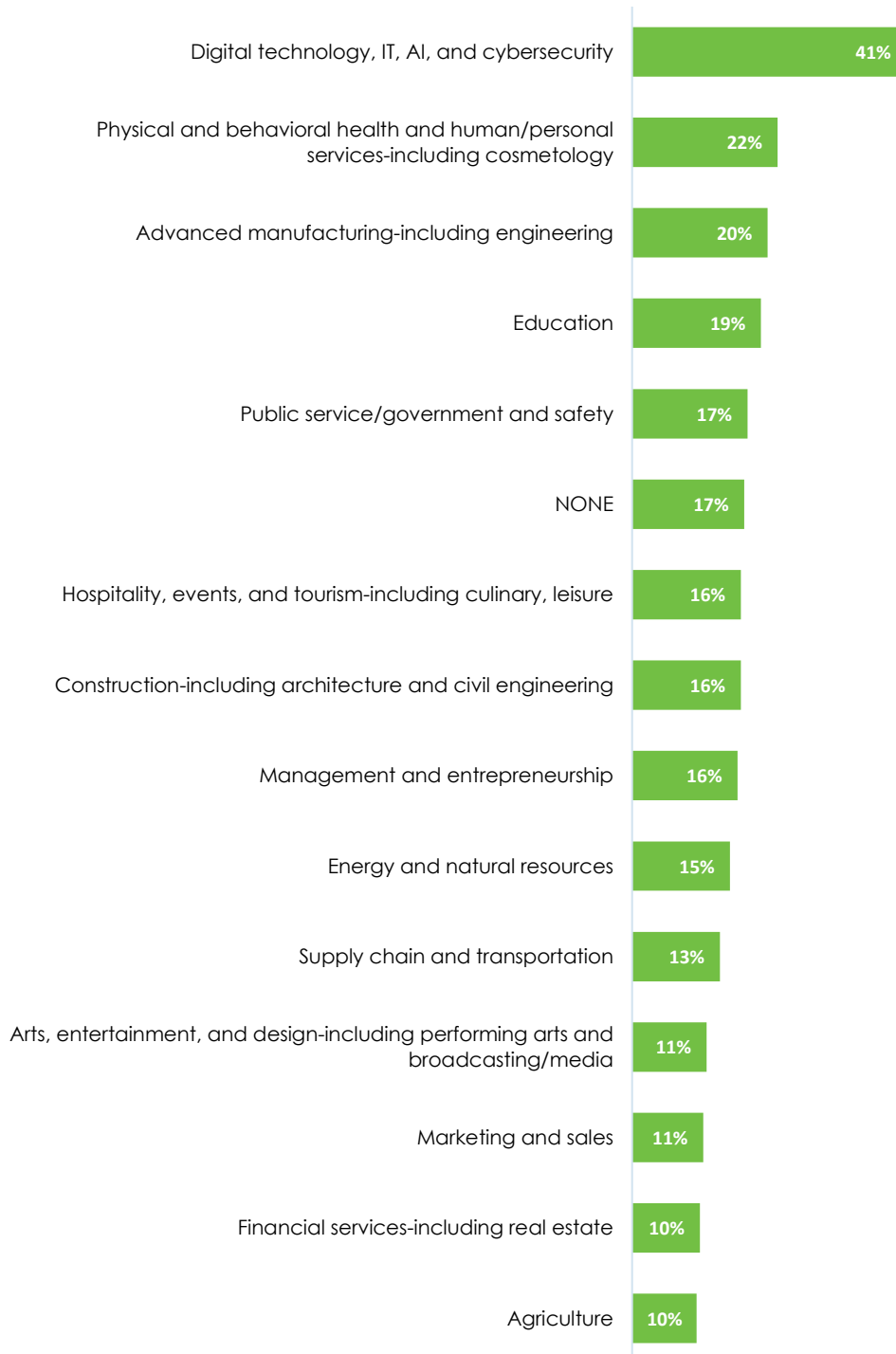


Figure 4

Select all that apply. In the NEXT five years, I expect my institution to INTRODUCE work-based learning offerings in the following fields:



## Program Availability and Gaps

Institutions are responding to student interest, but the pace of expansion has not matched demand. Digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity is the field where educators most commonly report having started new offerings in the past five years (33%), followed by advanced manufacturing (19%), construction (17%), and management and entrepreneurship (14%).

While most institutions have adjusted their program options over time, 1 in 5 educators (21%) say their institution has not started any new workforce programs in the past five years.

Program cuts have been relatively limited. Nearly two-thirds of educators (63%) say their institution has not dropped any work-based learning programs in the past five years, and no single field saw cuts reported by more than 8% of respondents. Hospitality and tourism (8%), arts and design (7%), and education (7%) are the fields most commonly dropped from the menu of programs available to students.

When asked how their institutions decide on changes to workforce programs, educators were more likely to point to the influence of enrollment trends (53%), direct requests from area employers (51%), and projections for local job growth (45%) than they were to cite student requests for specific offerings (33%). Only 1 in 4 survey students about the programs that they would like to see.

In addition to limited input from students, policy decisions may also be complicated by management challenges stemming from communication barriers and bureaucracy.

In responses to an open-ended survey question, educators highlighted those concerns. A professor from Missouri said:

“Work based learning is siloed at our institution. There is an office that does workforce development that never communicates with academic programs. Most academic majors are on their own in regards to finding opportunities and placing students in work-based learning.”

Figure 5

Select all that apply. In the past five years, my institution has **STARTED OFFERING** work-based learning in the following fields:

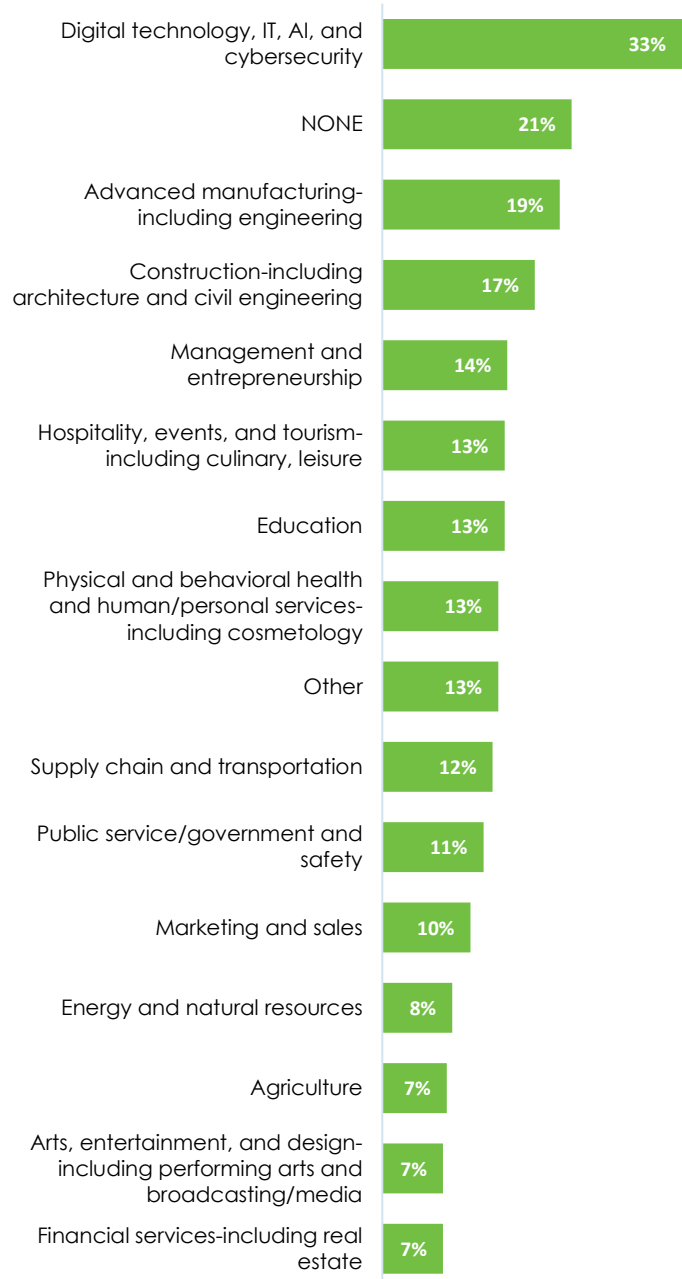
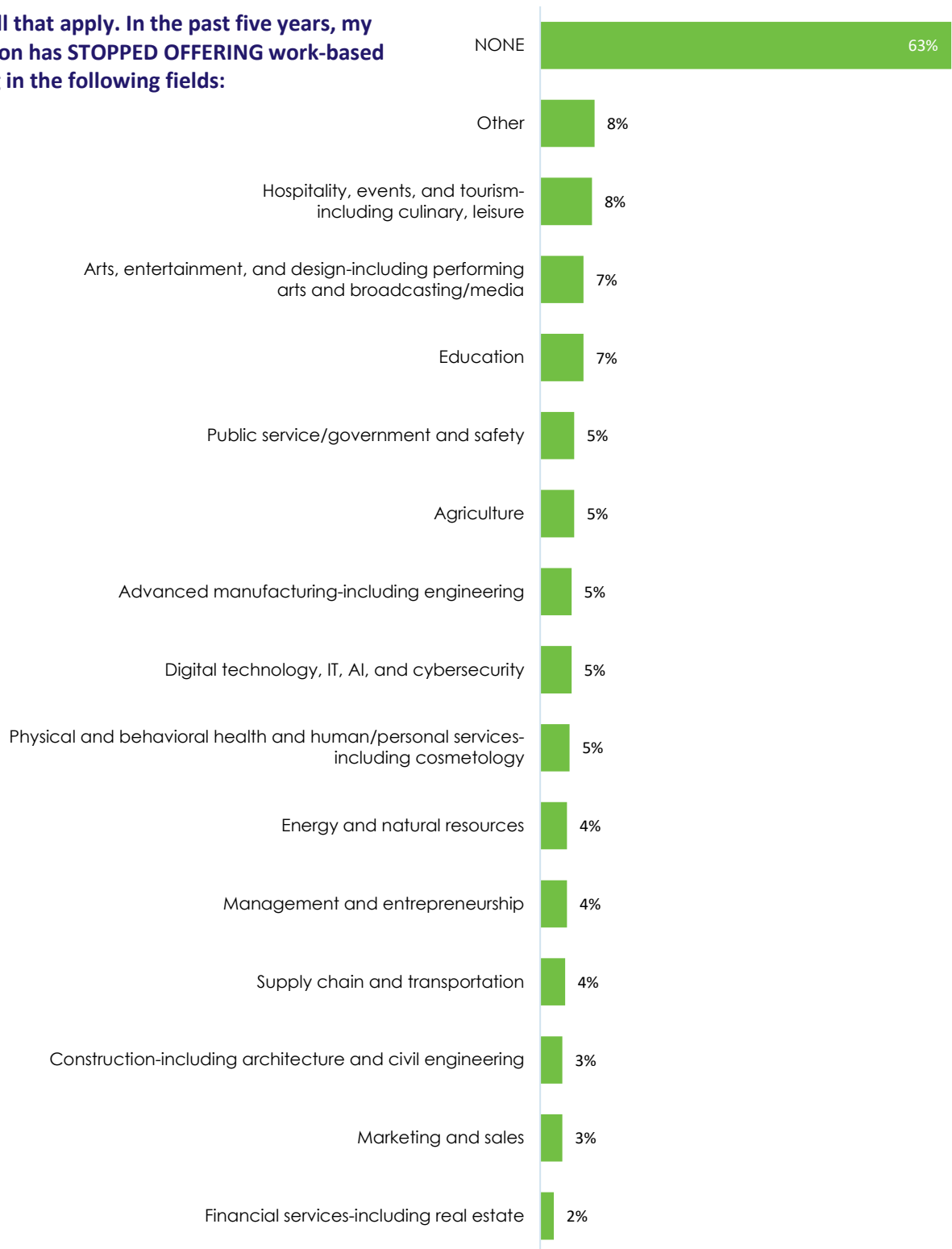


Figure 6

Select all that apply. In the past five years, my institution has STOPPED OFFERING work-based learning in the following fields:



## Program Availability and Gaps

(continued)

A Georgia dean described bureaucratic barriers: “We are held back significantly by tradition, faculty who deny the value of work-based learning, legacy bureaucratic hurdles in accreditation and state policy, and a cultural dismissiveness—by faculty and administrators—that somehow work-based learning is of lower quality.”

Efforts to increasingly incorporate student feedback in policy discussions may allow institutions to better connect programs to students’ interests and needs. Educators say the most common reason students pursue work-based learning is genuine interest in a career path (58%), followed by a desire to build on work or internships they are already doing (47%), the appeal of engaging coursework (43%), and the existence of high-paying local jobs in relevant fields (42%).

Financial need, specifically the requirement to support themselves or their families while studying, was cited by nearly a third (31%), a reminder that for many students, work-based learning is not just a career preference but an economic necessity.

Figure 7

**How does your institution decide on what changes to make to its workforce learning programs? Select all that apply.**

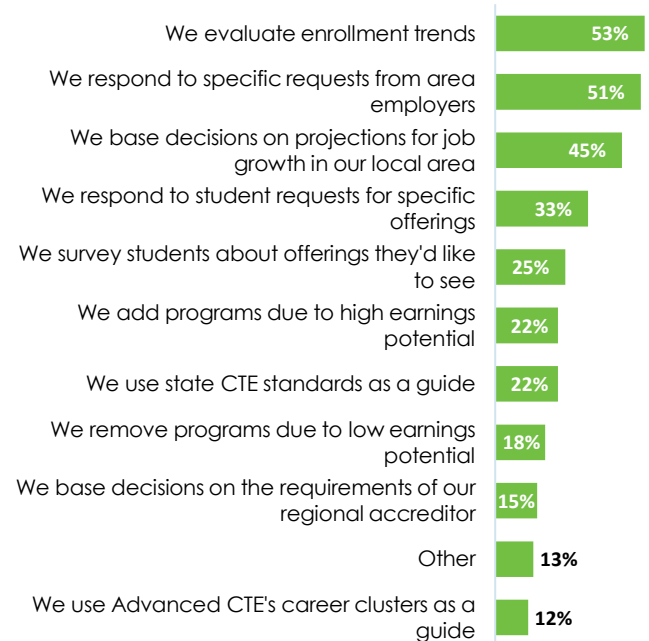
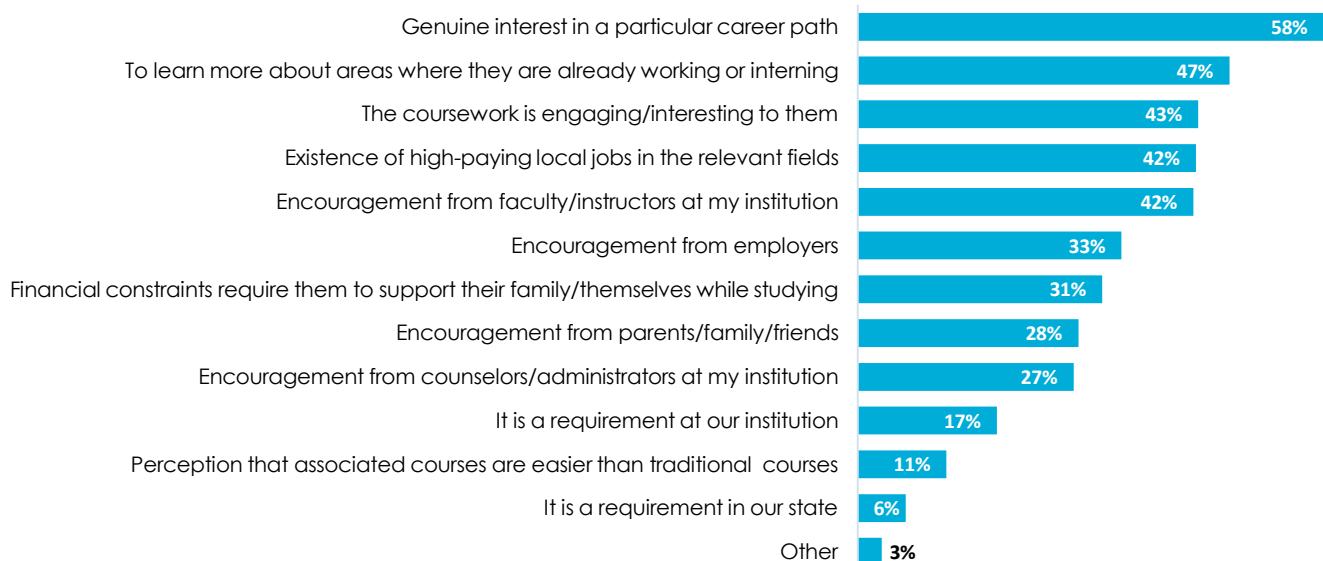


Figure 8

**What are the most common reasons why your students at your institution pursue work-based learning? Select all that apply.**



## Resources and Institutional Capacity

Resource constraints are a defining feature of the current landscape and educators know it. More than half of respondents (54%) say their institution's investment in work-based learning is smaller than its investment in traditional academics, with 35% describing it as a lot smaller. Only 10% say work-based learning receives a lot more investment than traditional academics.

The picture of recent resource trends is mixed. One-third of respondents (33%) say resources and programming have declined in the past five years.

Among those reporting declines, overall funding cuts (46%) and declining enrollment (29%) are the most commonly cited causes. Insufficient support from institutional leaders (24%) and state-level higher education leaders (23%) are also seen as barriers by more than one-fifth of respondents, along with declines in funding specifically designated for work-based learning (21%).

Figure 10

**In the past five years, have resources or programming for any of your institution's work-based learning offerings declined?**

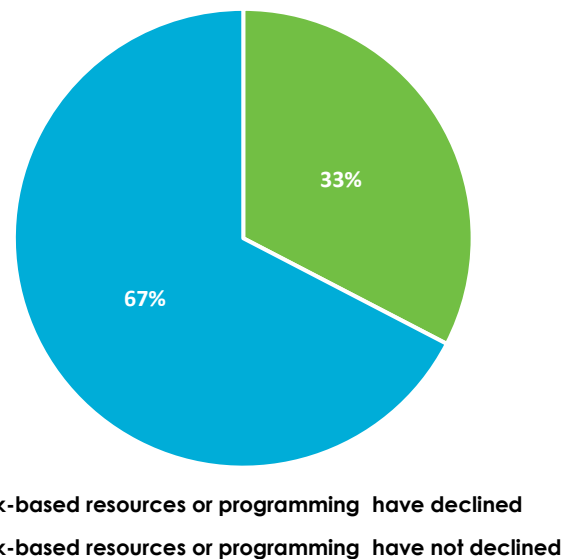


Figure 9

**For the purposes of this survey, work-based learning is defined as efforts to combine academic classroom-based coursework and paid on-the-job training (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, co-operative education). Compared to my institution's investment in traditional academics, my institution's investment in work-based learning is:**

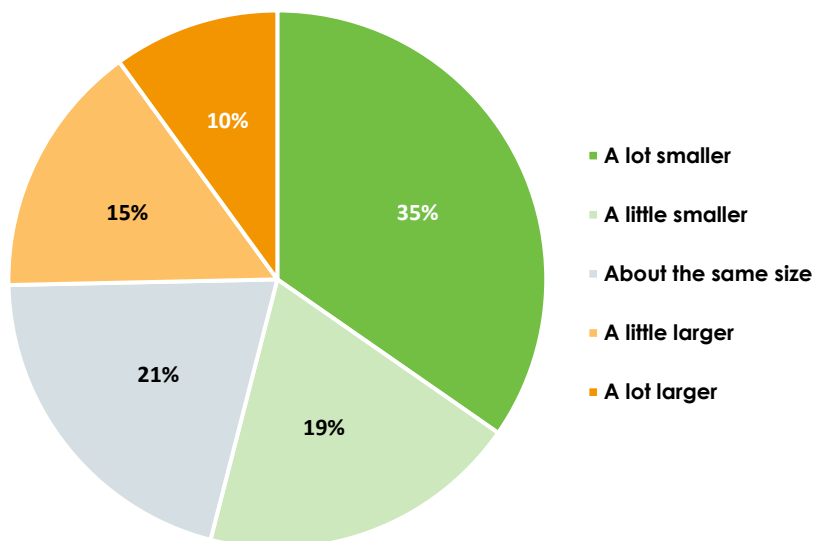


Figure 11

**Why have your work-based offerings decreased? Select all that apply.**



## Resources and Institutional Capacity

(continued)

Overall, 55% of postsecondary educators say that resources or programming for their institution's work-based learning offerings have increased over the past five years.

Among educators at institutions that have expanded their work-based learning programs, growth has been driven primarily by employer engagement. Increased interest from existing industry partners (55%) and employer difficulty attracting qualified candidates (41%) top the list of reasons for expansion, reinforcing that work-based learning tends to grow based on the labor market.

Figure 12

**In the past five years, have resources or programming for any of your institution's work-based learning offerings increased?**

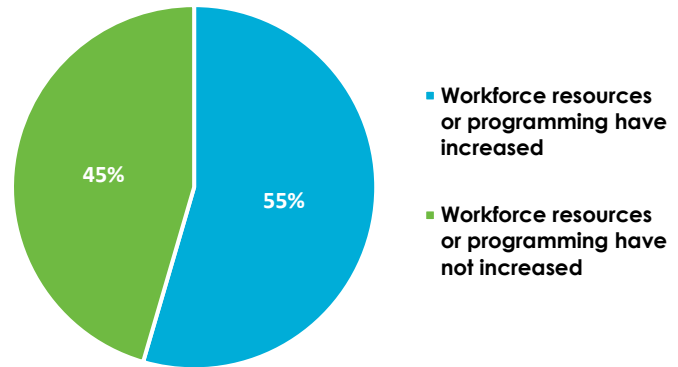


Figure 13

**Why have your work-based learning offerings increased? Select all that apply.**



## Resources and Institutional Capacity

(continued)

Increased support from institutional leaders (38%), growing student enrollment (38%), and increased student demand (38%) also play a role. Thirty-five percent of educators cite increased community demand and 33% say their institution has strategically shifted focus from traditional academics toward career preparation. Another 28% point to a track record of successful outcomes driving further demand, suggesting that in some cases growth is self-reinforcing once programs prove their value.

Only 7% of educators say an increase in their institution's overall funding has been a reason for increases in program offerings and just 16% cite an increase in funding specifically designated for work-based learning as a factor fueling growth in programs. Growth appears to be driven instead by employer relationships, community expectations, and institutional strategy.

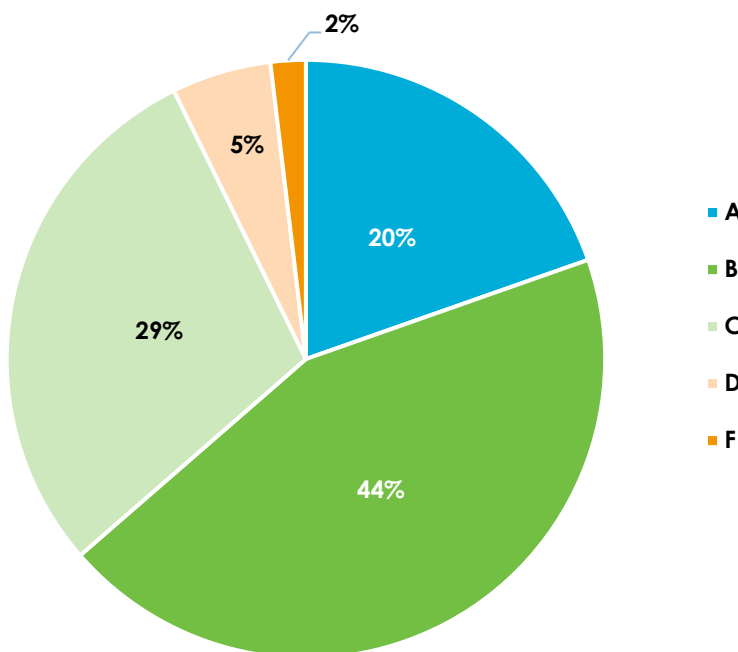
Postsecondary educators were also straightforward about quality. When asked to assign a letter grade to their institution's work-based learning programs, only 20% gave their programs an A. The largest share (44%) gave them a B grade and nearly 3 in 10 (29%) gave them a C. Just 7% assigned a D or F, but the clustering around B and C grades suggests widespread recognition that programs have room to improve.

In responses to an open-ended survey question, respondents were asked to explain their grades. One administrator from California described the issues that resulted in a B grade.

“We have had a paradigm shift in our institution towards work-based learning among the administration and the CTE instructors. This has led to innovation and renewed engagement with students. What brings us down to a B grade is the institutional restrictions of apportionment formulas that pressure us to offer fewer classes of small-size and greater per-student expenses, and our curriculum approval process.”

Figure 14

**If asked to assign a letter grade to the overall quality of your institution's work-based learning programs, what grade would you assign?**



## Employer Partnerships and Outlook

Educators are clear about what work-based learning needs most. When asked what would produce major improvements, stronger partnerships with local industries and employers (61%) topped the list by a wide margin, ahead of additional funding for courses and pathways (46%), more resources for facilities and equipment (37%), and marketing that better communicates the value of work-based learning (36%).

Staffing needs emerge as a significant theme as well. Over a third of educators (34%) cite the need to hire more full-time faculty and nearly as many (32%) point to the value of bringing in part-time instructors who are actively working in their fields, suggesting that practitioners with real-world experience are seen as essential to program quality.

Postsecondary educators also reveal a strong interest in systemic changes that reach beyond individual institutions. A third of educators (33%) say better preparation in K-12 would help more students succeed in work-based learning and 26% call for stronger partnerships with K-12 education. Another 27% each cite better data on local workforce needs and accreditation systems that better account for workforce learning participation.

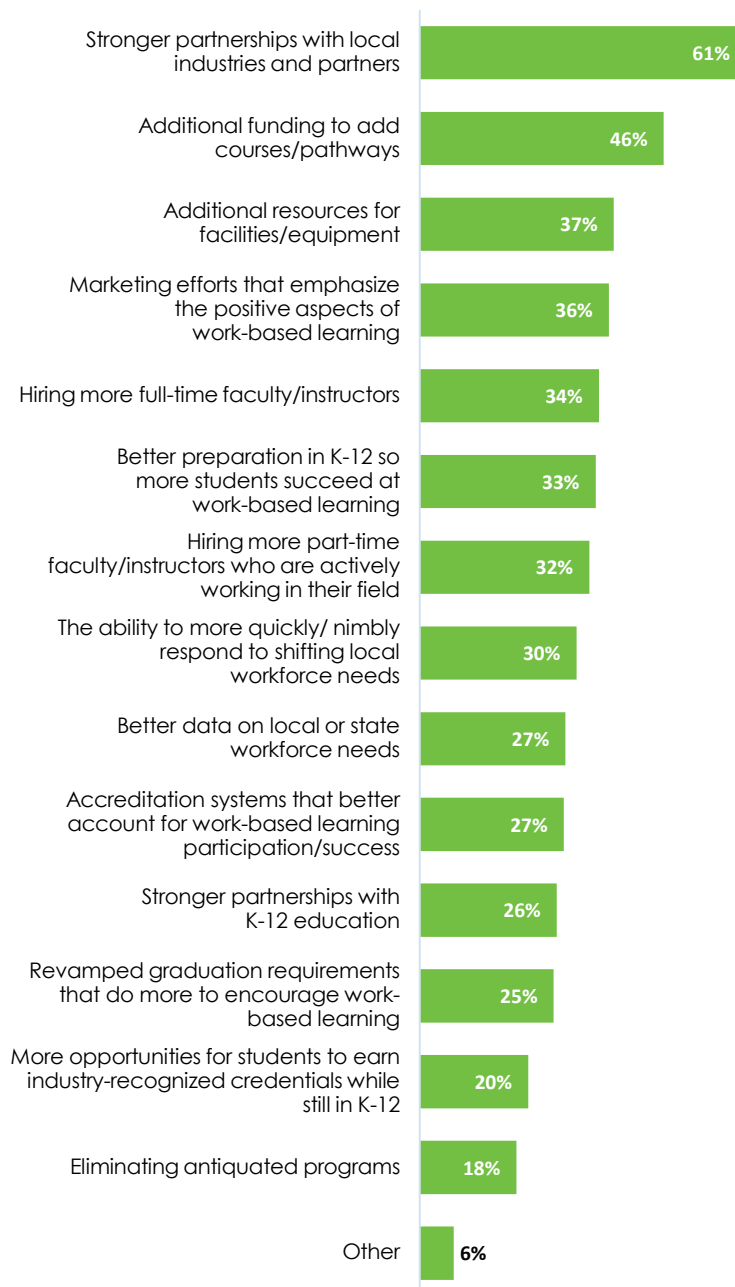
Agility also matters. Nearly a third of educators (30%) say the ability to respond more quickly to shifting local workforce needs would produce major improvements, a finding that speaks to how slowly institutions can move relative to how fast labor markets change.

A professor from Texas emphasized the role of local employers in response to an open-ended survey question:

“The institution does not drive the growth of work-based learning. The local employers do and the institution merely acts as a venue. They need to take more control over the programming. They are experts ... after all.”

Figure 15

Select all that apply. What—if anything—would lead to MAJOR improvements in work-based learning at your institution?



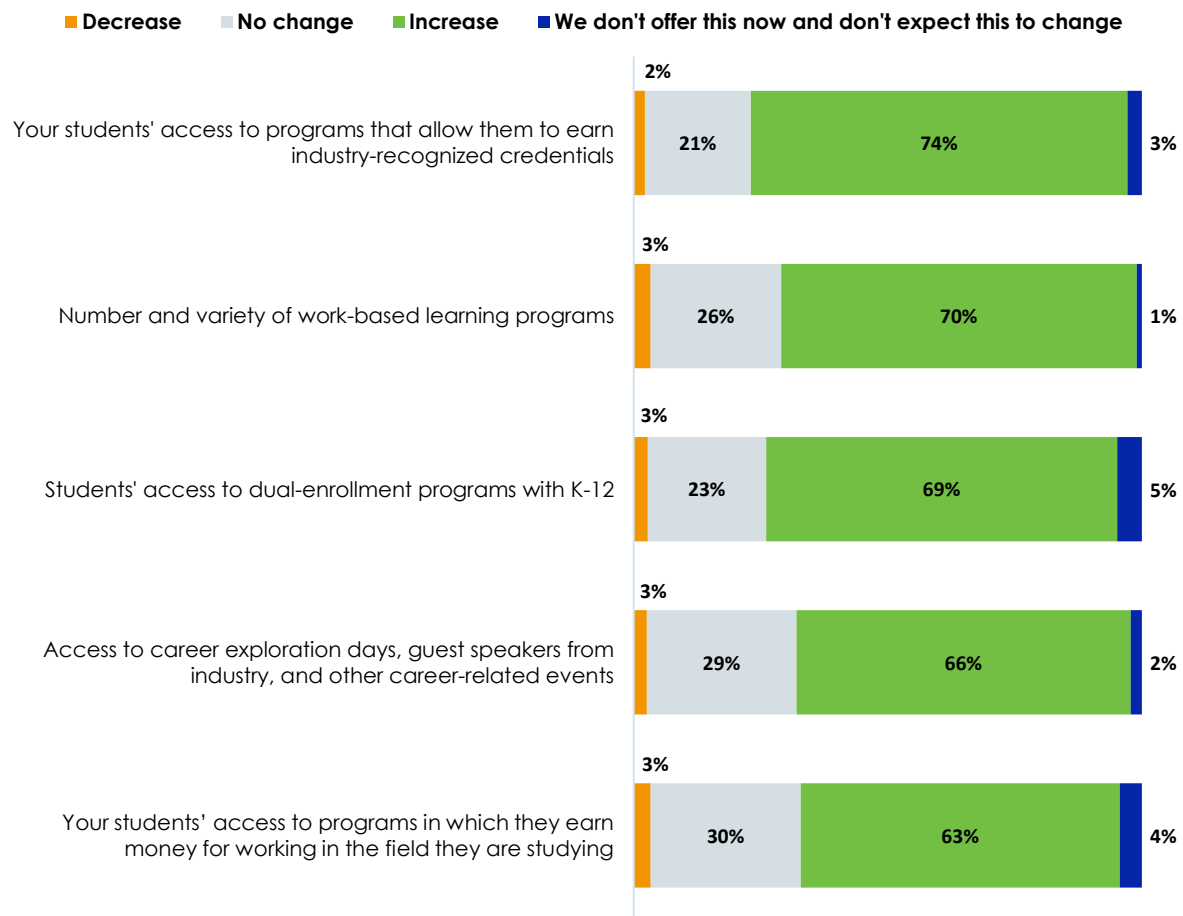
## Employer Partnerships and Outlook

(continued)

Despite these structural challenges, educators are broadly optimistic about where things are headed. The strongest signal comes from credentialing: nearly three-quarters of educators (74%) expect students to have greater access to programs that allow them to earn industry-recognized credentials over the next five years. Seven in ten (70%) also expect the number and variety of work-based learning programs at their institution to grow, with just 3% anticipating a decrease.

Figure 16

How, if at all, do you expect the following to change in the next five years at your institution?



## Employer Partnerships and Outlook *(continued)*

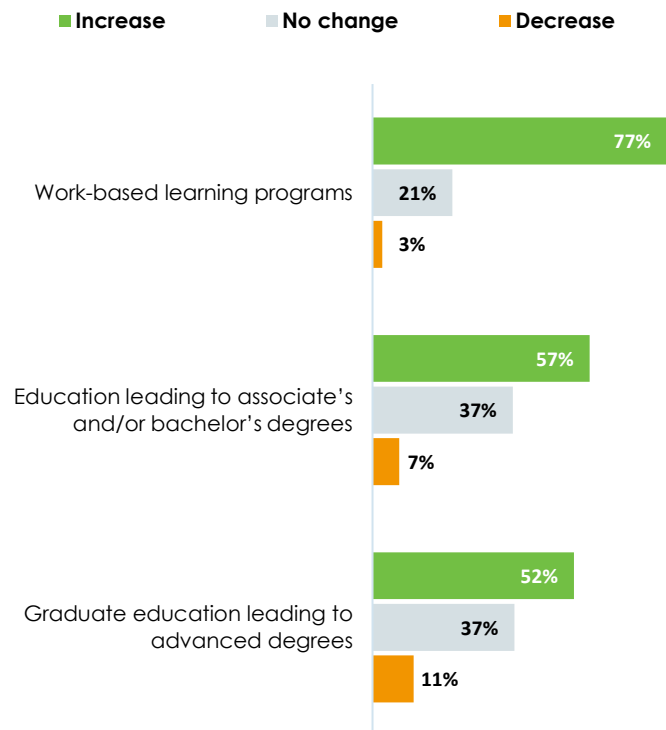
That optimism extends across the full range of access measures. Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) anticipate growth in dual-enrollment programs with K-12 and 66% expect expanded access to career exploration days, guest speakers, and other career-related events. Opportunities for students to earn money while learning are also expected to grow: 63% say students will have greater access to programs in which they are paid for working in their field of study.

Educators' expectations for their own institutions' overall priorities reflect increases in students' access to programs. More than three-quarters (77%) expect their institution's emphasis on work-based learning to grow over the next five years.

Those expectations are in contrast to views on traditional degree programs where lower percentages predict an increasing role for associate and bachelor's degrees (57%) or for graduate education (52%).

Figure 17

**How, if at all, do you expect your college or university's emphasis on the following to change over the next five years?**



## Conclusion



Postsecondary work-based learning is currently defined by two competing forces: genuine momentum and persistent constraints.

Student demand is strong and growing, particularly in digital technology and hands-on trades. Institutions are responding, but capacity has not kept pace. More than half of respondents say their institution invests less in work-based learning than in traditional academics and the programs that do exist earn mostly B and C grades from the educators closest to them.

Recent growth in workforce programs has been driven largely by employer relationships and student interest rather than increased funding. Whether postsecondary institutions can move from following workforce trends to leading them remains an open question.

The gap between student interest and the infrastructure needed to support work-based learning is a key challenge. Efforts to expand work-based learning will require sustained employer partnerships, adequate facilities and equipment, and faculty who are actively connected to their fields. Educators recognize these needs but they are optimistic: 7 in 10 expect program offerings to grow and more than three-quarters expect their institution's overall emphasis on work-based learning to increase over the next

five years.

Responses to an open-ended survey question illustrate the complicated efforts required to prepare students for the world of work while facing resource limitations but also signal some optimism for the future.

“Workforce learning is a high priority at our institution, but funding holds us back from offering more programs,” a nursing director from Missouri commented. A Utah instructor noted some gradual shifts. “Coursework is still scholarly focused more than focused on practical skills used in the workforce. The methods of instruction are changing gradually, but it will take time and concerted focus by leadership to really change so the focus is on job preparation more than knowledge stuffing,” the instructor said. A leader of a nursing program in Texas said “I know our institution is wanting to pursue more work-based learning. It starts with community support, and I think we are getting there.”

Overall, the survey results featured in this report provide important insights for policymakers as they develop a roadmap to expand programs and work to better ensure that postsecondary students have opportunities to prepare for future careers.

## Key Contributors



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**Sterling Lloyd** is the assistant director of the EdWeek Research Center. In this capacity, he manages data analyses and the development of surveys for data-driven journalism. Since joining the research center in 2005, he has authored articles on college- and work-readiness, school finance, student achievement, and other prominent topics in K-12 education.



**Alex Harwin** is a quantitative research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. They work on a wide variety of projects, from marquee annual reports to data-driven reporting in collaboration with the Education Week newsroom. Alex received an education at Stanford and UT, earning degrees in Sociology and policy analysis.