

How College Contributes *to* Workforce Success

EMPLOYER VIEWS ON
WHAT MATTERS MOST

ASHLEY FINLEY



Association
of American
Colleges and
Universities



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With a foreword by Lynn Pasquerella

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Within the higher education community, it is relatively uncontroversial to equate educational quality with the outcomes of a contemporary liberal education and the innovative teaching and learning practices that help students achieve them.

We know—and can demonstrate—that a liberal education prepares students for success throughout their working lives, in addition to fulfilling the broader democratic mission of American higher education. Yet, the vocabulary of liberal education is less widely used and less well understood outside of higher education. As a result, when engaging with external stakeholders in conversations about the value of college, we too often find ourselves talking past one another. This can be especially problematic when it comes to expectations and perceptions related to workforce preparation.

The alignment of educational outcomes with workforce needs plays an essential role in promoting both individual socioeconomic mobility and national economic growth and competitiveness. Achieving and sustaining this alignment requires ongoing dialogue between educators and employers about what constitutes workforce preparedness. What do graduates need to know and be able to do in order to succeed in the workplaces of today and tomorrow, and how does a

college education enable or contribute to the development of a shared knowledge base and skill set?

To inform and advance the dialogue between educators and employers, as well as the wider national conversation about the value of higher education, AAC&U periodically conducts surveys and focus groups with representative samples of executives and hiring managers from companies and organizations that employ college graduates. Since 2007, the findings have identified common ground between educators and employers with respect to expectations for college-level learning. In fact, a consistent headline-level finding across all our employer research has been that employers and educators are largely in agreement when it comes to the value of a contemporary liberal education—provided it is described using language that is common and accessible to both stakeholder groups. Our employer research also has identified important differences in the perceptions of how well colleges and universities are doing in terms of meeting those shared expectations.

How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most presents the findings of our seventh survey of employers, which was conducted in partnership with Hanover Research. Like our previous surveys, it found substantial support among employers for the outcomes and experiences of a liberal education and makes it clear that a liberally educated graduate is strongly positioned for success in the job market. Nine in ten employers believe that it is important to achieve the learning outcomes that define a contemporary liberal education, for example, and that it is worthwhile to obtain a college degree. The same number say they would be more likely to hire a job applicant who had participated in at least one of a defined set of engaging educational practices, often called “high-impact practices.”

Significantly fewer employers believe college-educated applicants have received this type and level of preparation, however. Only six in ten say that recent graduates possess the knowledge and skills needed for success in entry-level positions at their companies or organizations. So, while employers clearly value liberally educated graduates, their actual experience with job applicants and new hires has shown

that not all recent graduates have, in fact, received a liberal education. This discrepancy may account for the finding that one in three employers does not have confidence in higher education.

Finally, for the first time, our employer research found evidence of an emerging generation gap among employers that may signal increasing confidence in higher education and even greater support for liberal education over the coming years. And of particular significance at a time of mounting need for higher education to redress racial injustice and other forms of systemic inequity, the new survey found evidence of greater recognition of the value of civic skill building and community engagement among younger and more highly educated employers. We will continue to follow this trend.

I hope you will find the full results presented in this report to be helpful as you engage in stakeholder conversations, both on campus and off, about the economic benefits of liberal education. And I particularly hope you will include students in those conversations. Their future is at the heart of this report.

Lynn Pasquerella
President, Association of
American Colleges and
Universities

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This report presents findings from an online survey that was conducted in October 2020 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in partnership with Hanover Research.

The total respondent sample of 496 included equal numbers of executives and hiring managers who are responsible for making hiring and promotion decisions in US companies of various types and sizes across a wide range of industries (see fig. 1). Only respondents representing organizations at which a minimum of 25 percent of entry-level positions are filled by employees who hold an associate's or bachelor's degree were eligible for participation. The survey respondents are collectively referred to as "employers" throughout the report.

The report is organized into two parts. The findings presented in part one focus on employer views and perceptions related to higher education, in general, and the goals of an undergraduate liberal education, in particular. Part one also includes findings related to mindsets and personal qualities that, while not commonly included in listings of expected outcomes

of college-level learning, nonetheless play an important role in individual success in both college and the workplace.

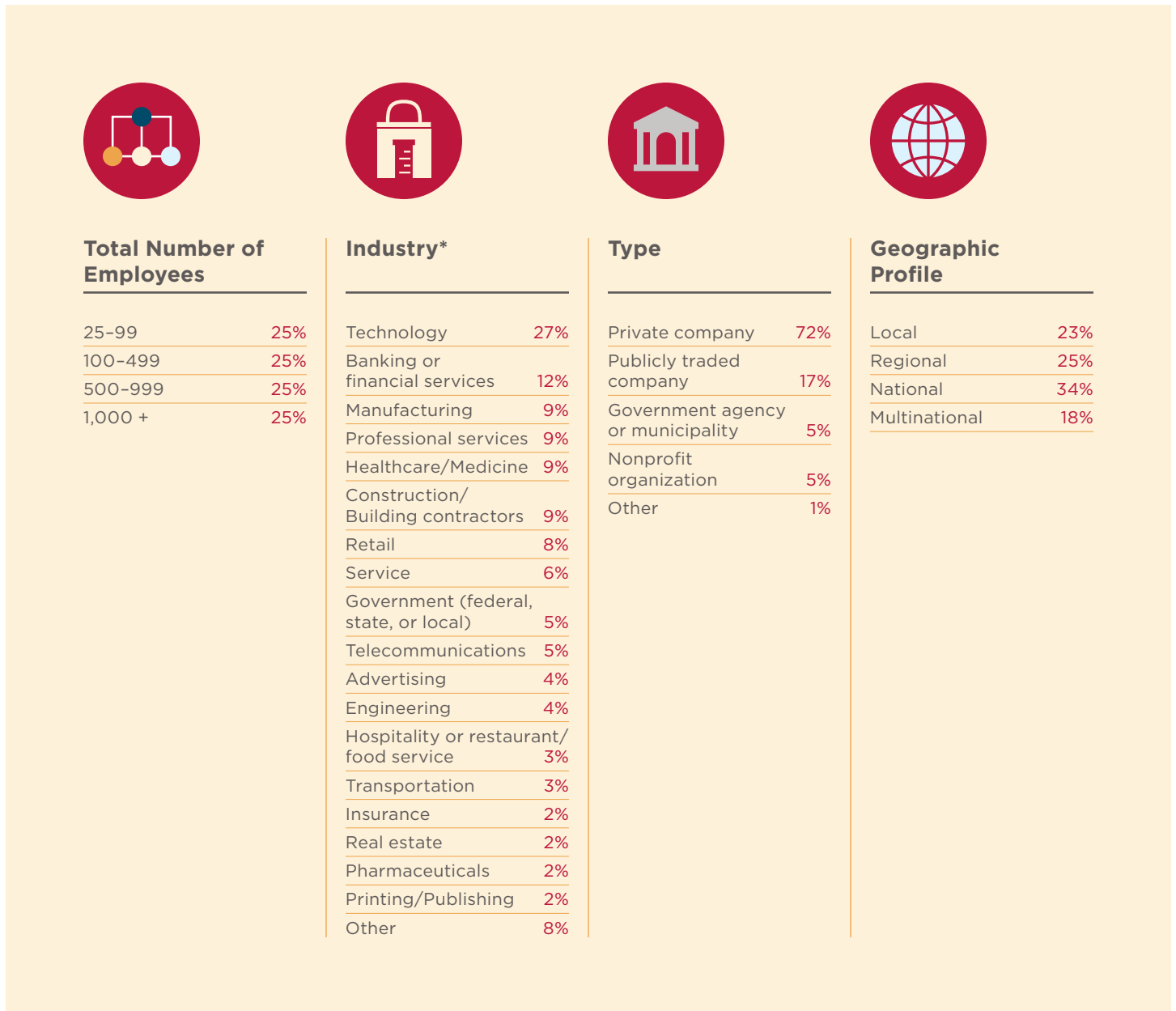
Employers are not a homogenous group, and disaggregation by demographic categories can reveal variations in their views and perceptions of higher education as well as in what they value and seek in job applicants. Part two of this report presents significant differences that appeared in the survey results in relation to respondent age and educational attainment. Most notably, the survey results point to the possible emergence of a generation gap that may lead over time to greater confidence in higher education, greater support for liberal education, and greater recognition of the value of the civic-related outcomes of college education.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Employers have confidence in higher education and value the college degree.
- A liberal education provides the knowledge and skills employers view as important for career success.
- Personal aptitudes and mindsets also play an important role in career success.
- Completion of active and applied learning experiences gives job applicants a clear advantage.
- Both breadth and depth of learning are needed for long-term career success.
- College graduates are becoming more effective at communicating their achievements to employers.
- Employers see room for improvement in the preparation of college graduates for work.
- Views on higher education and perceptions of recent graduates vary significantly by employer age and educational attainment.
- Younger employers (under 40) place a significantly higher value on civic-related learning outcomes and experiences than older employers (50 and above) do.

FIGURE 1

Characteristics of respondent companies



* Cumulative percentage exceeds 100% because respondents could choose multiple categories.

Employer Views on Higher Education and Workforce Preparedness

Employers have confidence in higher education and value the college degree.

As with many institutions today, higher education has a public trust problem. The ongoing decline in public confidence in higher education has been well documented. In 2018, for example, Gallup found that the percentage of US adults who had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education had dropped from 57 to 48 percent in just three years—a decline steeper than for any other US institution measured by Gallup.¹

By contrast, as shown in figure 2, employer confidence in higher education remains relatively high. In 2018, AAC&U found that 63 percent of employers had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education.² That number has now risen to 67 percent. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of employers value the college degree itself (see fig. 3). Almost nine in ten (87 percent) believe that getting a college degree or credential is “definitely” or “probably” worth the investment of time and money. In fact, the percentage who believe college completion is “definitely” worthwhile rose by seven points between 2018 and 2020.³

FIGURE 2

A majority of employers have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in higher education.

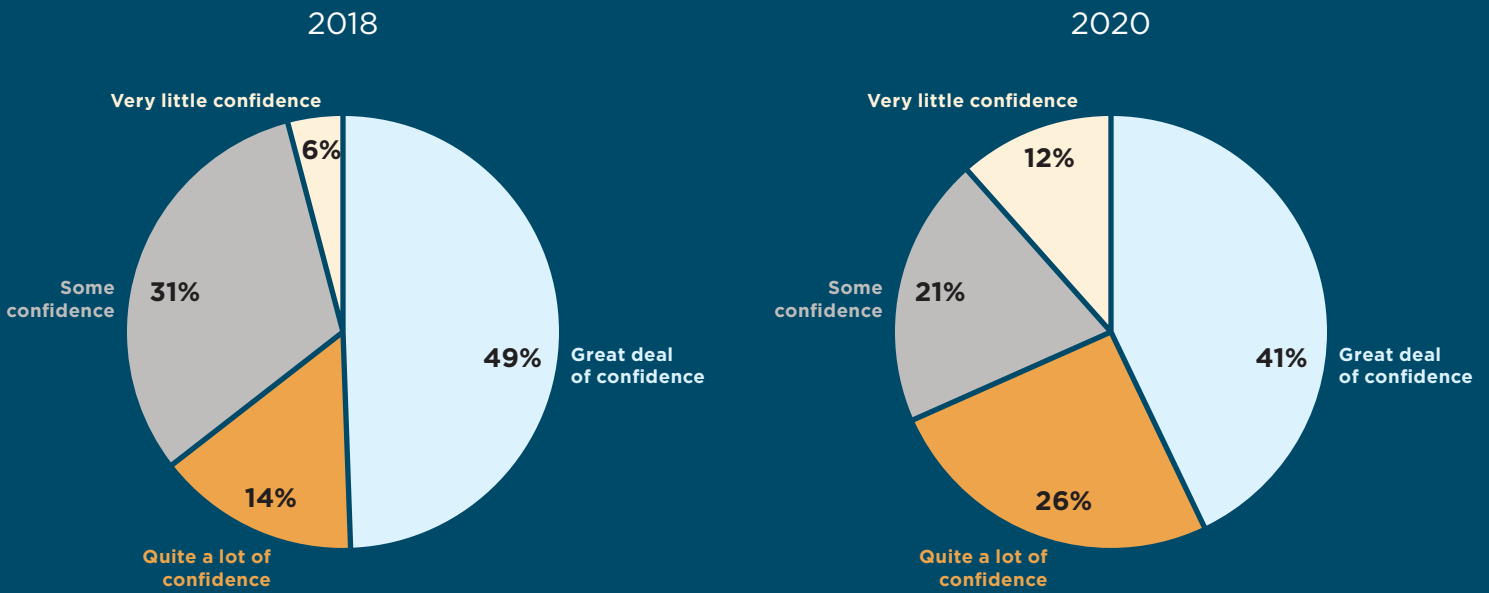
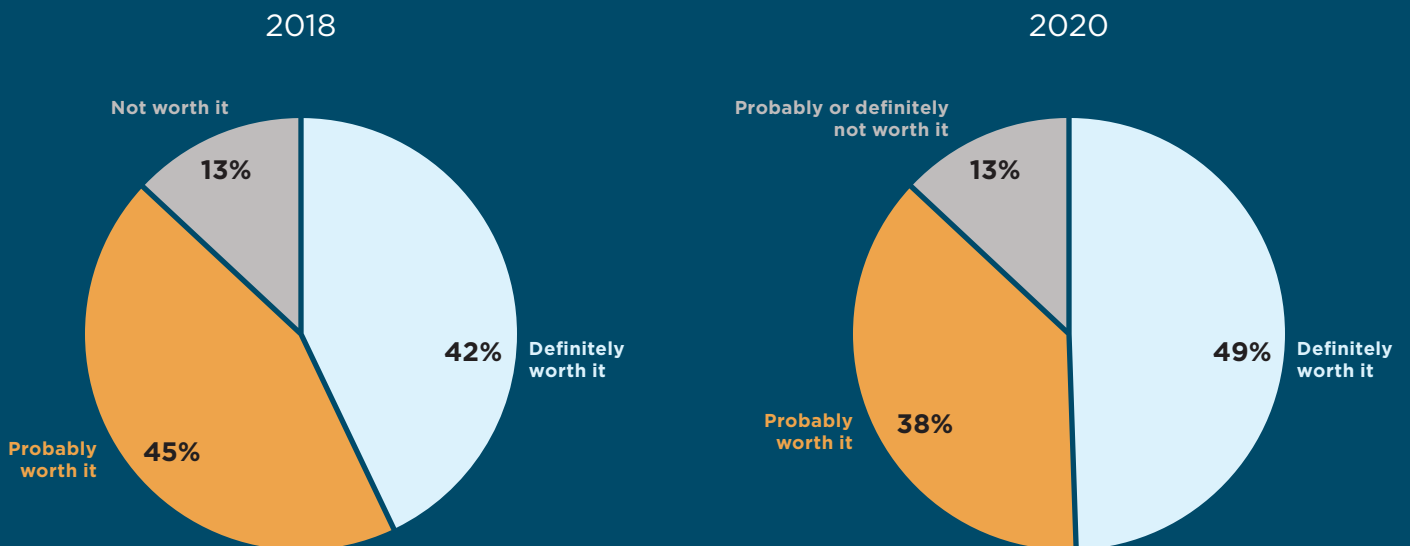


FIGURE 3

Nearly nine out of ten employers think that getting a college degree is either definitely or probably worth it.



Employers believe the outcomes of a liberal education are important for success in the workforce; personal qualities and capacities matter, too.

In 2007, AAC&U formed the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, which defined a set of learning outcomes understood to be essential for work, life, and citizenship.⁴ This set of outcomes was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities; extensive analysis of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. Achievement of the “essential learning outcomes,” as the set has come to be known, is the aim of an undergraduate education of the highest quality—regardless of where students study, what they major in, or what their career goals may be.

The essential learning outcomes, together with the innovative educational practices and applied learning experiences known to facilitate their achievement, define a contemporary liberal education. A primary objective of AAC&U's periodic employer surveys is to continue to test the foundational premise that the essential learning outcomes are essential to work and to probe more broadly employer views of the value of a liberal education as preparation for success in and beyond entry-level positions across the US economy.

And indeed, a majority of employers continue to view the essential learning outcomes as “very important” for success in the workforce, and more than nine in ten regard them as either “somewhat important” or “very important” (see fig. 4). The single exception is civic skills/engagement, which

is viewed as “very important” by just 41 percent of employers and as either “somewhat important” or “very important” by just over eight in ten.

While the top-ranked outcomes vary from year to year, critical thinking and analysis, problem-solving, teamwork, and communication through writing and speaking have consistently been ranked highest over time (see fig. 5). By contrast, civic-oriented outcomes have consistently been ranked lowest by employers. The key finding here, however, is not which outcome or outcomes are most or least important, but rather that employers regard the overall set of essential learning outcomes as important for success in the workforce. This finding has remained consistent across all of AAC&U's employer research since 2006.⁵

Along with canvassing employers' views of essential learning outcomes, this latest survey also explored employer views on an additional set of eleven mindsets and personal capacities that research suggests are connected with learning processes and student success. In a nutshell, we wanted to understand the degree to which employers value college graduates' dispositions toward capacities such as expanding their learning, being self-motivated, engaging constructively with feedback, and persisting through failure. As shown in figure 6, the survey revealed the perceived importance of these mindsets and personal capacities for workforce success: a large majority of employers view them as “very important,” which suggests they place similar weight on these mindsets and personal capacities as they do on the essential learning outcomes.

FIGURE 4

At least half of employers view the skills of a liberal education as “very important” for college graduates.

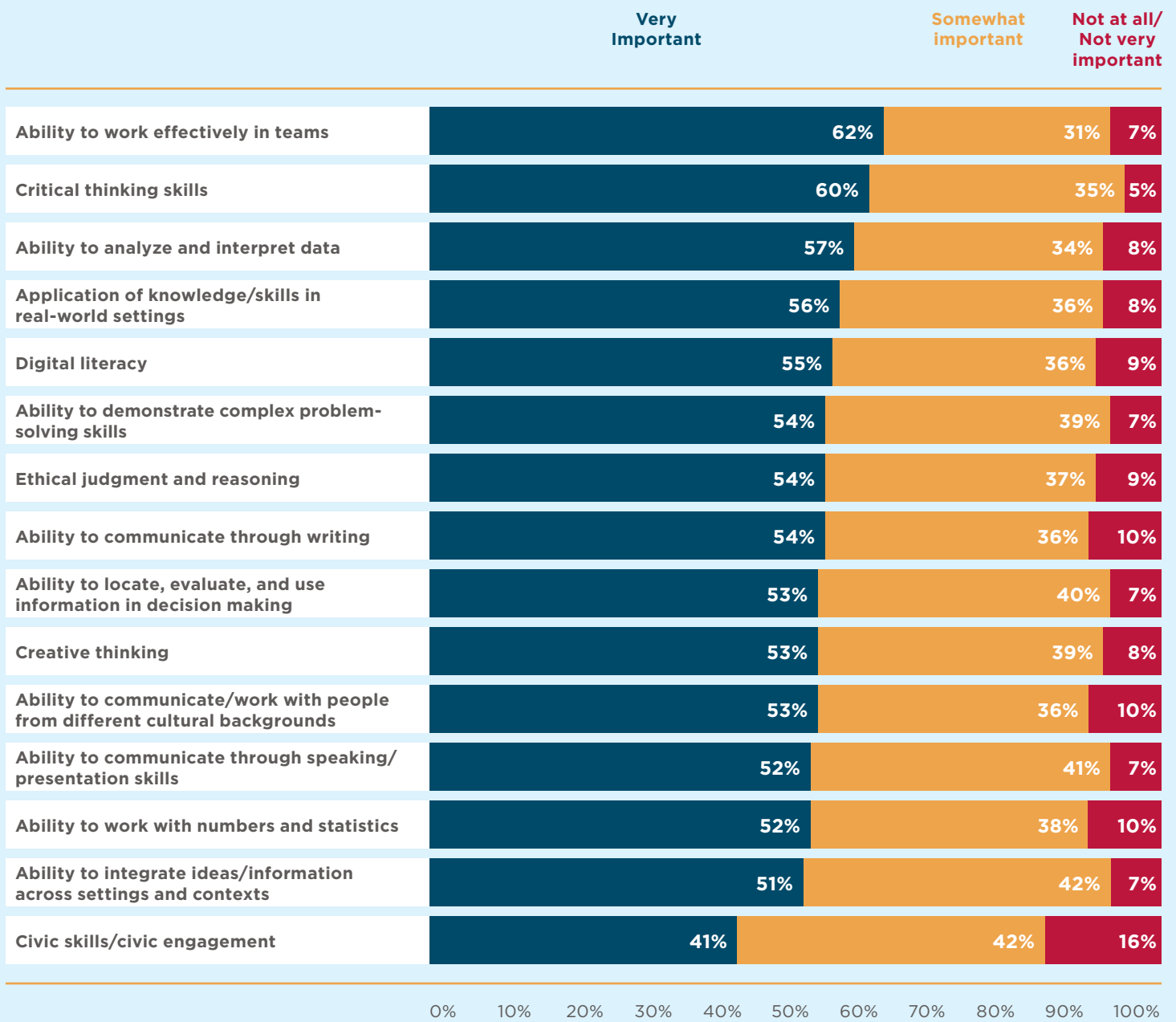
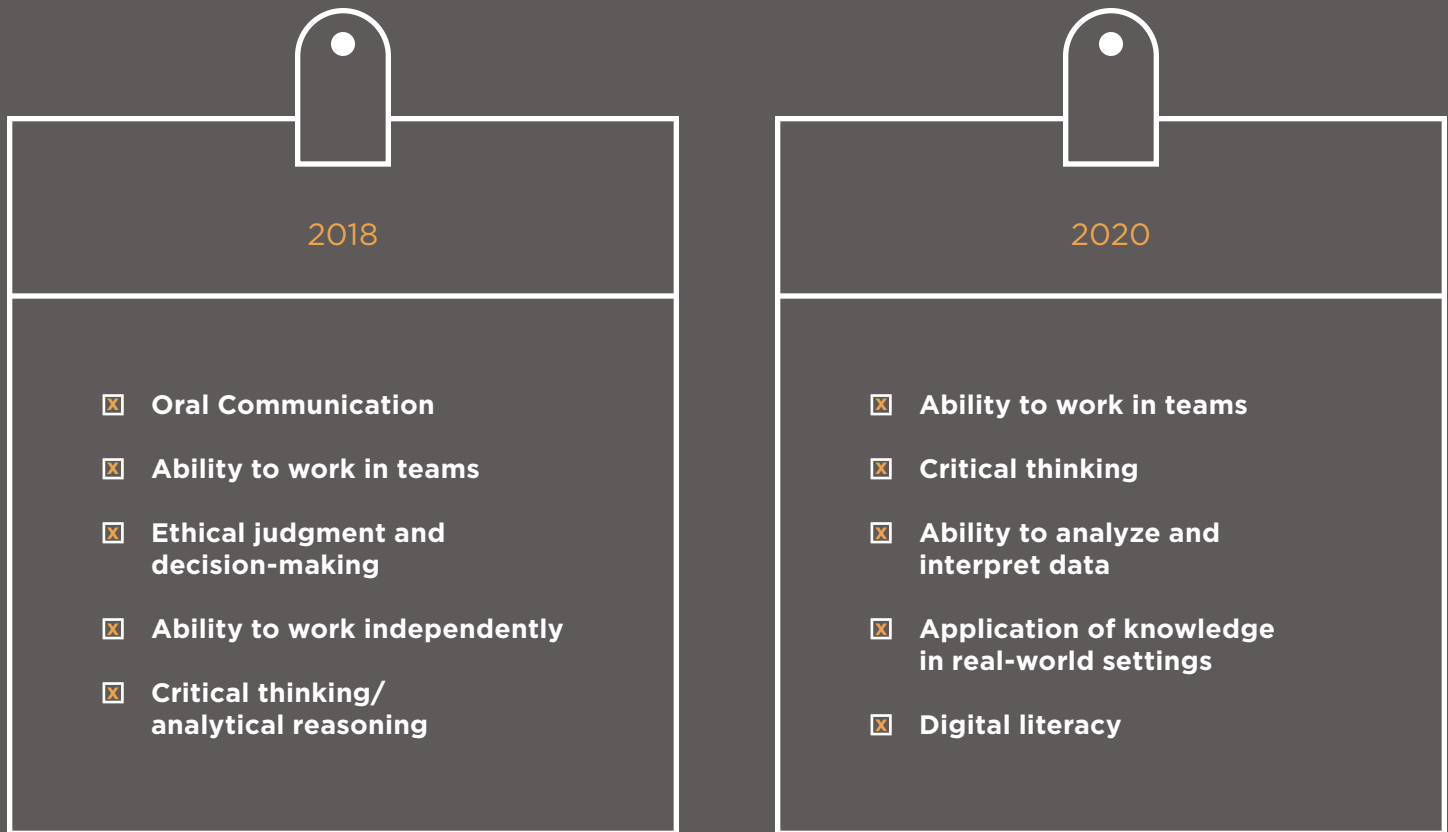


FIGURE 5

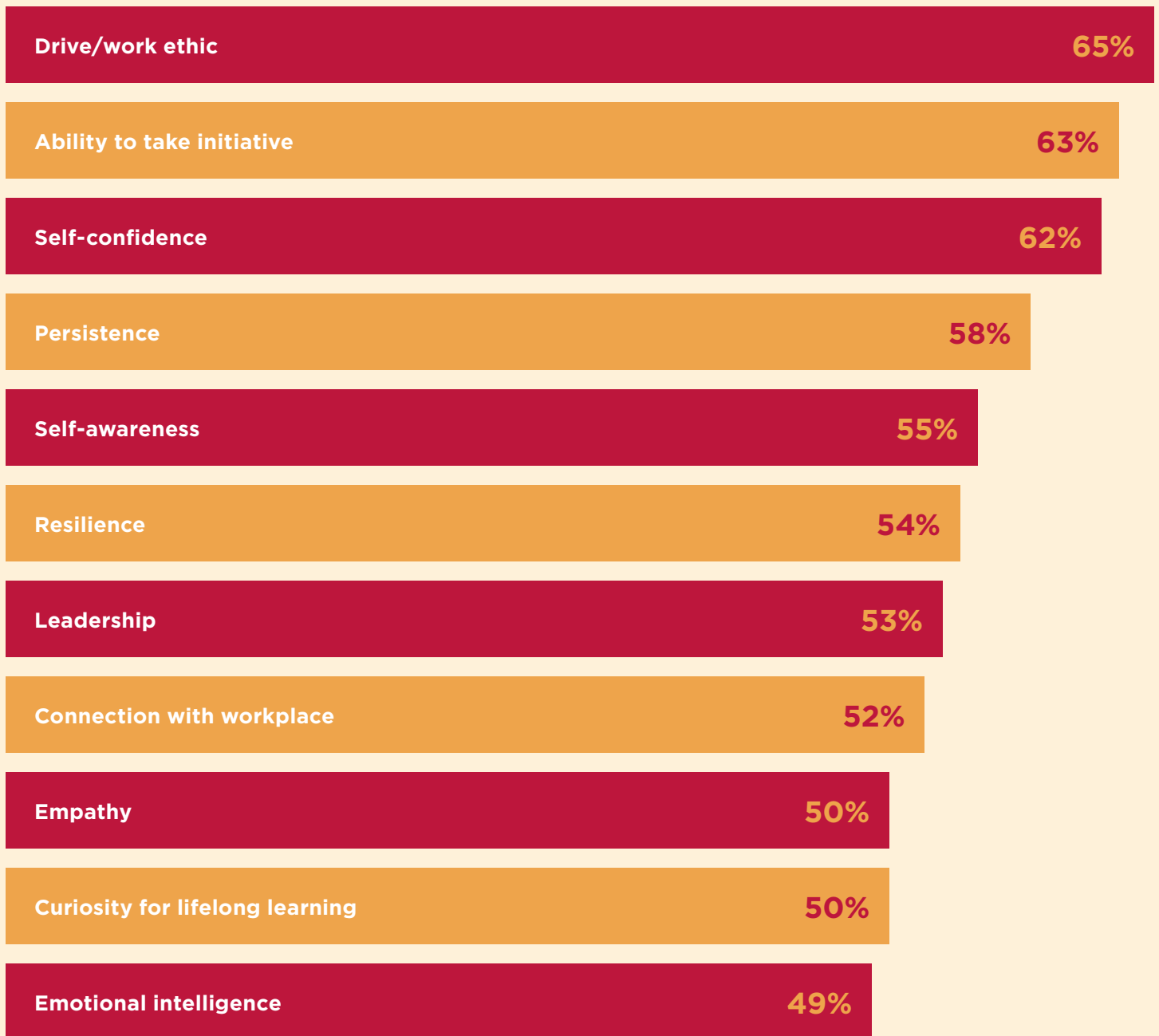
Comparison of highest ranked outcomes, 2018 and 2020 AAC&U employer surveys*



*The 2018 and 2020 outcomes comparison is based on different scales. The 2020 survey used a four-point Likert scale of very, somewhat, not very, and not at all important. The 2018 survey employed a 0-10 scale, where ratings of 8-10 were reported as “very important.”

FIGURE 6

At least half of employers think it is “very important” for college graduates to possess a range of mindsets and aptitudes to be successful.



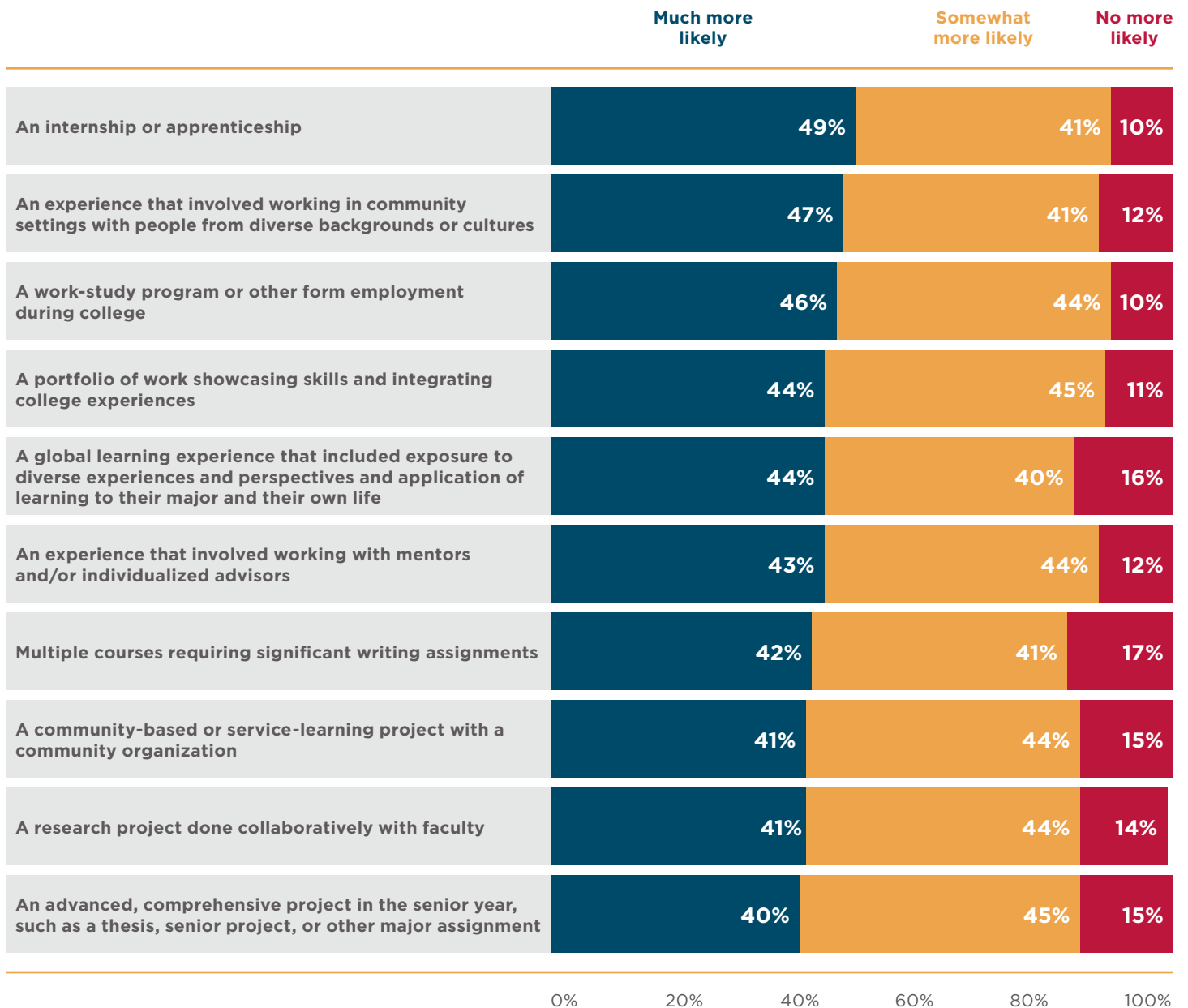
Completion of active and applied learning experiences gives job applicants a clear advantage.

Research has shown that participation in certain active and applied educational experiences can have a demonstrably positive impact on students by improving their engagement and deepening their learning.⁶ Increasingly recognized as a distinguishing feature of a contemporary liberal education, these “high-impact practices” are widely valued by educators. Employers also value these practices.

As was found in the 2018 survey,⁷ a graduate’s participation in high-impact practices as part of their college experience can positively influence hiring decisions. More than four in five employers say they would be either “somewhat more likely” or “much more likely” to consider hiring recent college graduates if they had completed one of these active and applied experiences in college (see fig. 7).

FIGURE 7

Employers value applied experiences, but internships lead the list of what makes employers “much more likely to consider” hiring a candidate.



Employers believe both breadth and depth of learning contribute to long-term career success.

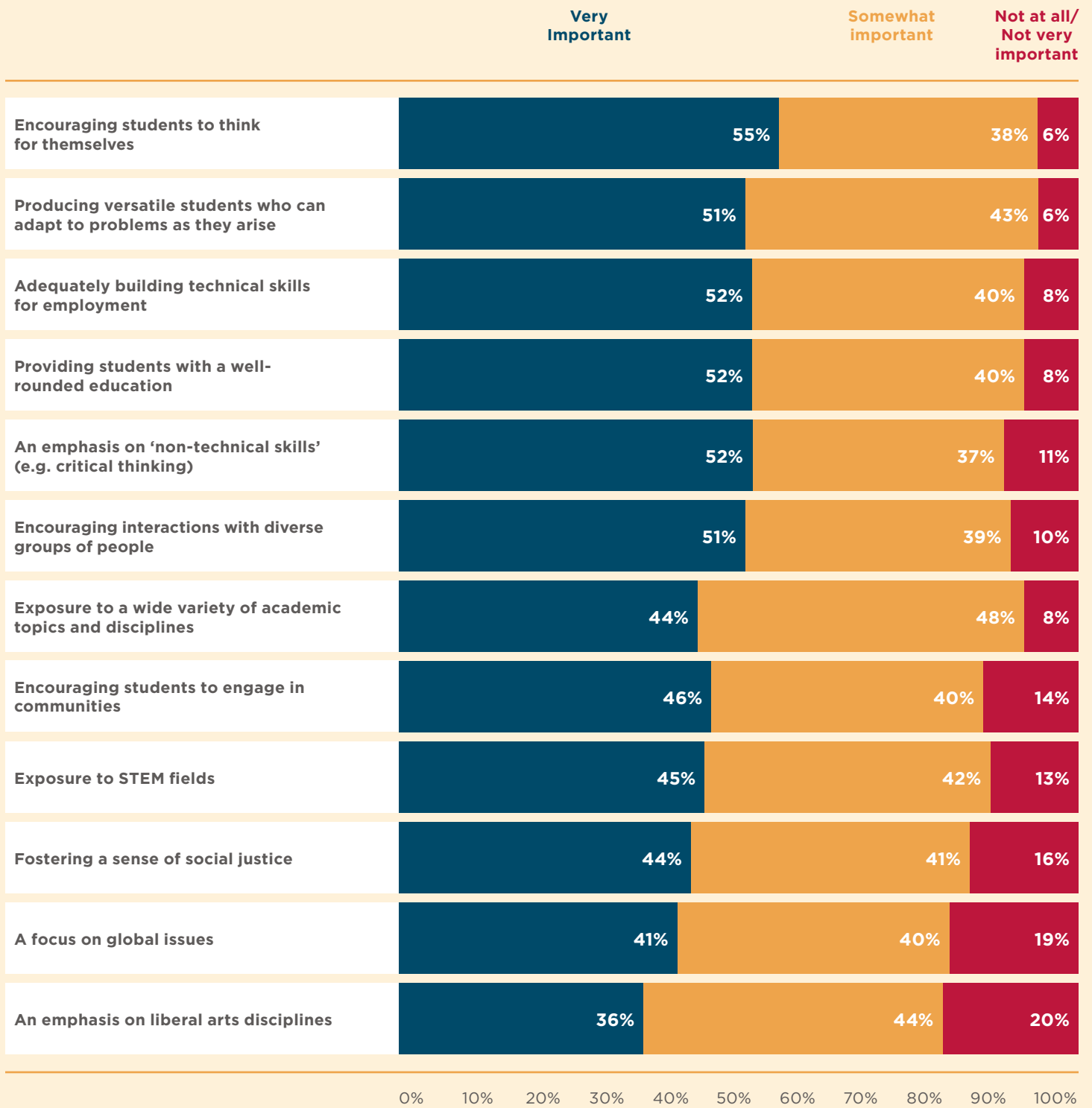
The effect of educational attainment on long-term career success depends on the quality of the educational experience overall. An undergraduate education is the sum of many parts. To understand how employers view the role of college in preparing graduates for long-term career success, employers were provided with a list of descriptors that characterize various aims of an undergraduate education. While any of these descriptors may characterize a goal of learning experiences of various types, together they constitute the distinctive hallmarks of a liberal education.

Of the descriptors provided, “encouraging students to think for themselves” was rated most highly, with half of all employers indicating that it is “very important” for long-term career success (see fig. 8). Echoing findings from previous AAC&U employer surveys, responses tended overall to reflect a desire for the college experience to balance breadth and depth of learning. For example, the same percentage of employers rated “an emphasis on non-technical skills” and “adequately building technical skills for employment” as “very important.”

Half of all employers regard “providing students with a well-rounded education” as “very important.” However, what constitutes “well-rounded” is unclear. Only two in five employers believe it is “very important” for a college education to include “exposure to a wide range of academic topics/disciplines,” “fostering a sense of social justice,” “a focus on global issues,” or “an emphasis on the liberal arts.”

FIGURE 8

Employers favor attributes of a college education that combine breadth and depth of learning.



Graduates are becoming more effective at communicating the outcomes of their college experience, especially through the use of ePortfolios.

Even when college graduates have acquired the skills and knowledge sought by prospective employers, their career success depends on their ability to communicate these accomplishments during the hiring process. Almost nine in ten employers (87 percent) report that recent college graduates are either “somewhat effective” or “very effective” in communicating about the skills and knowledge they gained in college (see fig. 9). This marks a significant increase since 2018, when just 67 percent of employers⁸ reported that recent college graduates were “at least fairly effective” at this.

For decades, the most commonly used tool for communicating the outcomes of the educational experience has been the college transcript. Yet, AAC&U’s employer research has consistently shown that employers also recognize the utility of electronic portfolios (or “ePortfolio”) when evaluating job candidates. An ePortfolio is a personal website used to deepen student learning through reflection on, and curation of, work products produced across the college experience. ePortfolios can be used by graduates to showcase and communicate their educational achievements.

Nine in ten employers consider the availability of an ePortfolio to be either “somewhat useful” or “very useful” for the hiring process, an 11 percent increase since 2018.⁹ Further, nearly half of all employers (49 percent) now believe the availability of an ePortfolio to be “very useful,” the largest percentage since 2015 (see fig. 10), when AAC&U first surveyed employer views on the value of ePortfolios.

Regardless of how the ePortfolio is provided—in a résumé, a follow-up email, or even as part of an email signature—nearly half of all employers surveyed would be “very likely” to click on the link to view a college graduate’s ePortfolio.

FIGURE 9

Nearly nine in ten employers find college graduates to be at least somewhat effective in communicating the skills and knowledge they have gained in college.

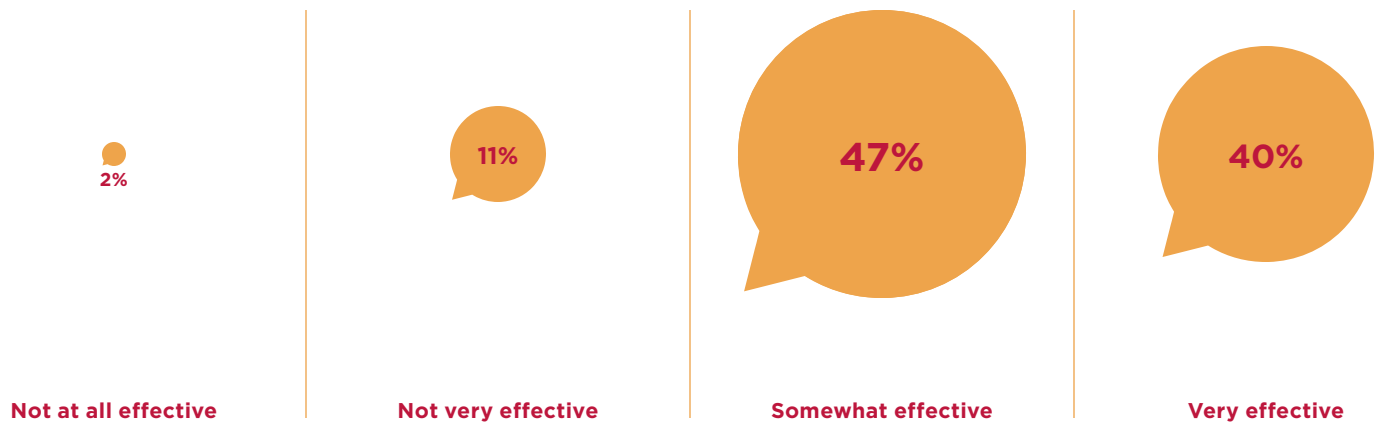
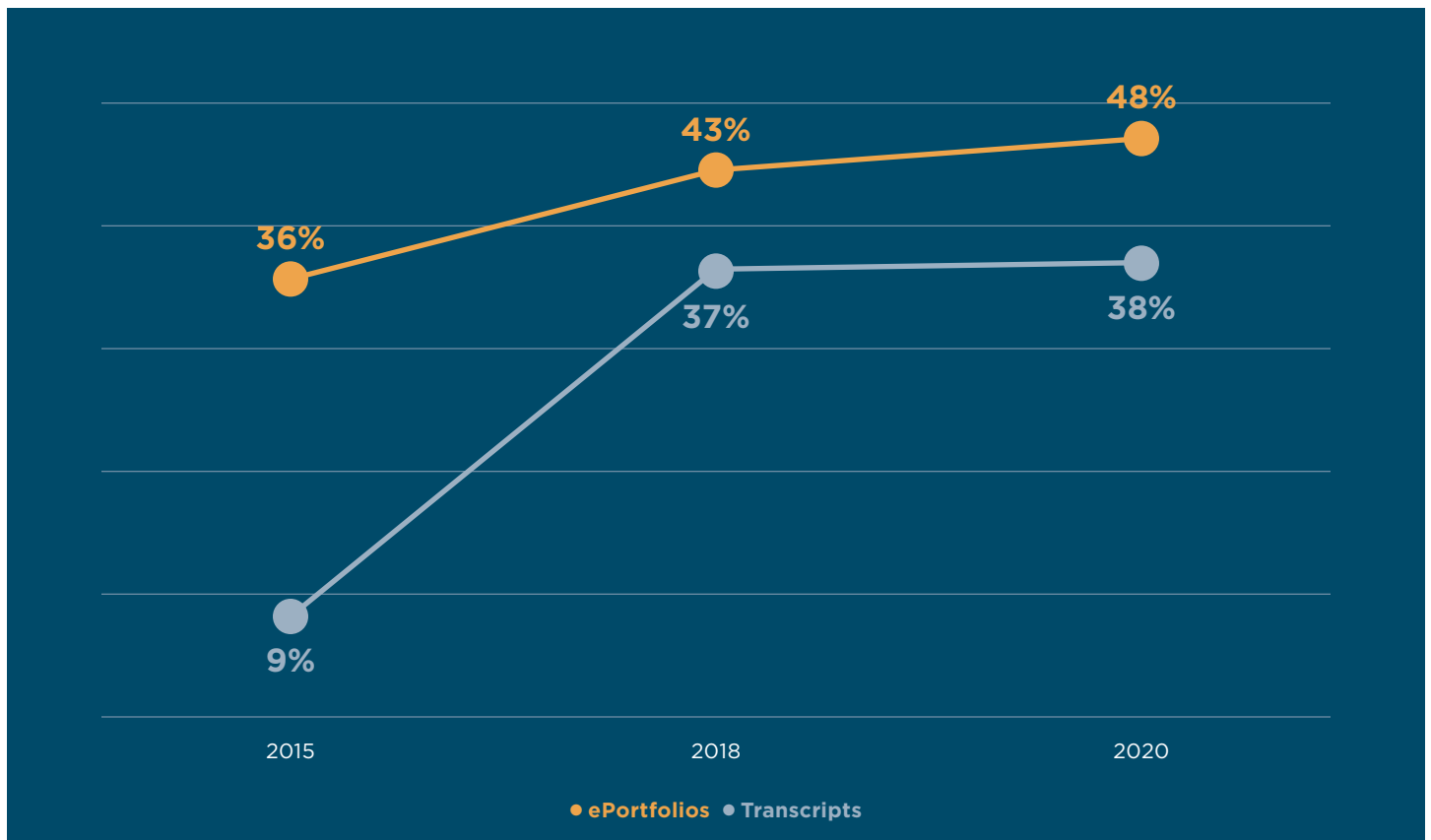


FIGURE 10

The percentage of employers that view ePortfolios as “very useful” in evaluating job candidates continues to increase.



Employers see room for improvement in the preparation of graduates for success in the workplace.

While nearly nine in ten employers (87 percent) report that they are at least “somewhat satisfied” with the ability of recent college graduates to apply the skills and knowledge learned in college to complex problems in the workplace, just under half (49 percent) are “very satisfied.” Moreover, as shown in figure 11, just six in ten employers believe that college graduates possess the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in entry-level positions, and just over half (55 percent) believe they possess the knowledge and skills required for advancement and promotion.

To probe these findings further, we asked employers to assess college graduates’ level of preparedness with regard to each of the learning outcomes deemed essential for success in the workplace (see fig. 4 above). As was found in 2018,¹⁰ there is a significant gap between the high level of importance employers place on the learning outcome, on the one hand, and their estimation of college graduate’s level of preparation, on the other (see fig. 12).

FIGURE 11

Employers think recent college graduates are more prepared to succeed in entry-level positions than to advance or be promoted.

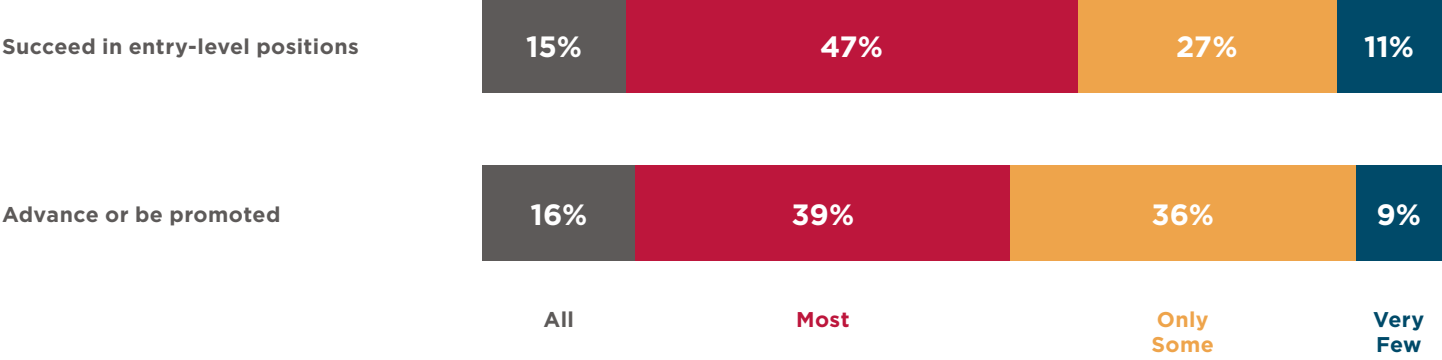
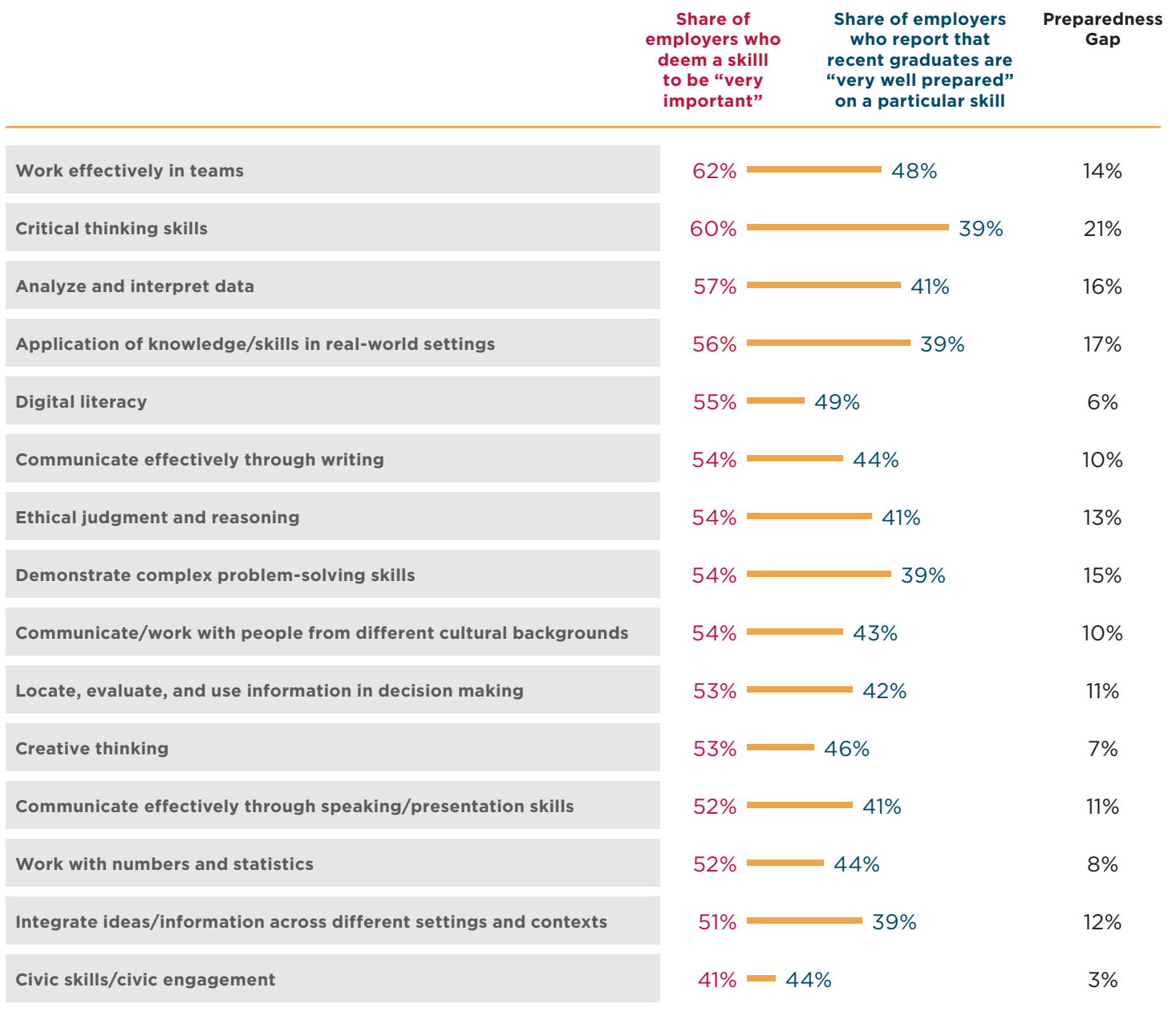


FIGURE 12

Employers do not believe most graduates possess the level of preparedness needed for workforce success.



How Employer Views Vary by Age and Educational Attainment

The findings presented in this section highlight the importance of recognizing how differences among employers, specifically in terms age and educational attainment, correlate with variations in their views regarding the value of higher education, the competencies and experiences that matter most for workforce success, and the levels of preparedness among recent graduates. Just as campuses have come to understand the importance of conceptualizing the student body as an assembling of students of diverse backgrounds and cultures, rather than as a homogenous whole, the findings presented below suggest a need to be cognizant of the differences among employers.

Persistent differences were found between employers in the youngest age group (i.e., those under forty) and employers aged fifty and above. Though differences by educational attainment were not as pronounced as those by age, the views of employers who completed at least some postgraduate work or earned a postgraduate degree differed markedly from those of employers with lower levels of educational attainment (bachelor's, associate's, or less).

Of the employers represented in our survey sample, those under forty and those aged fifty and above were equally divided between hiring manager and executive positions at their organizations. Moreover, representatives of both age groups were equally distributed across the diverse range of organizational types. The employers under forty, however, were significantly more diverse by race and gender (see fig. 13).

By contrast, employers with at least some postgraduate education were overwhelmingly male (see fig. 14). A significantly higher percentage of employers with an associate's degree or less identified as Black or African American (21%), as compared to those with postgraduate education (8%). Additionally, a significantly higher percentage of employers with a bachelor's degree identified as Hispanic or Latino (15%), as compared to those with at least some postgraduate education (6%). Employers with at least some postgraduate education were disproportionately represented in the technology industry and in multinational organizations.

FIGURE 13

Profile of participating employers by age

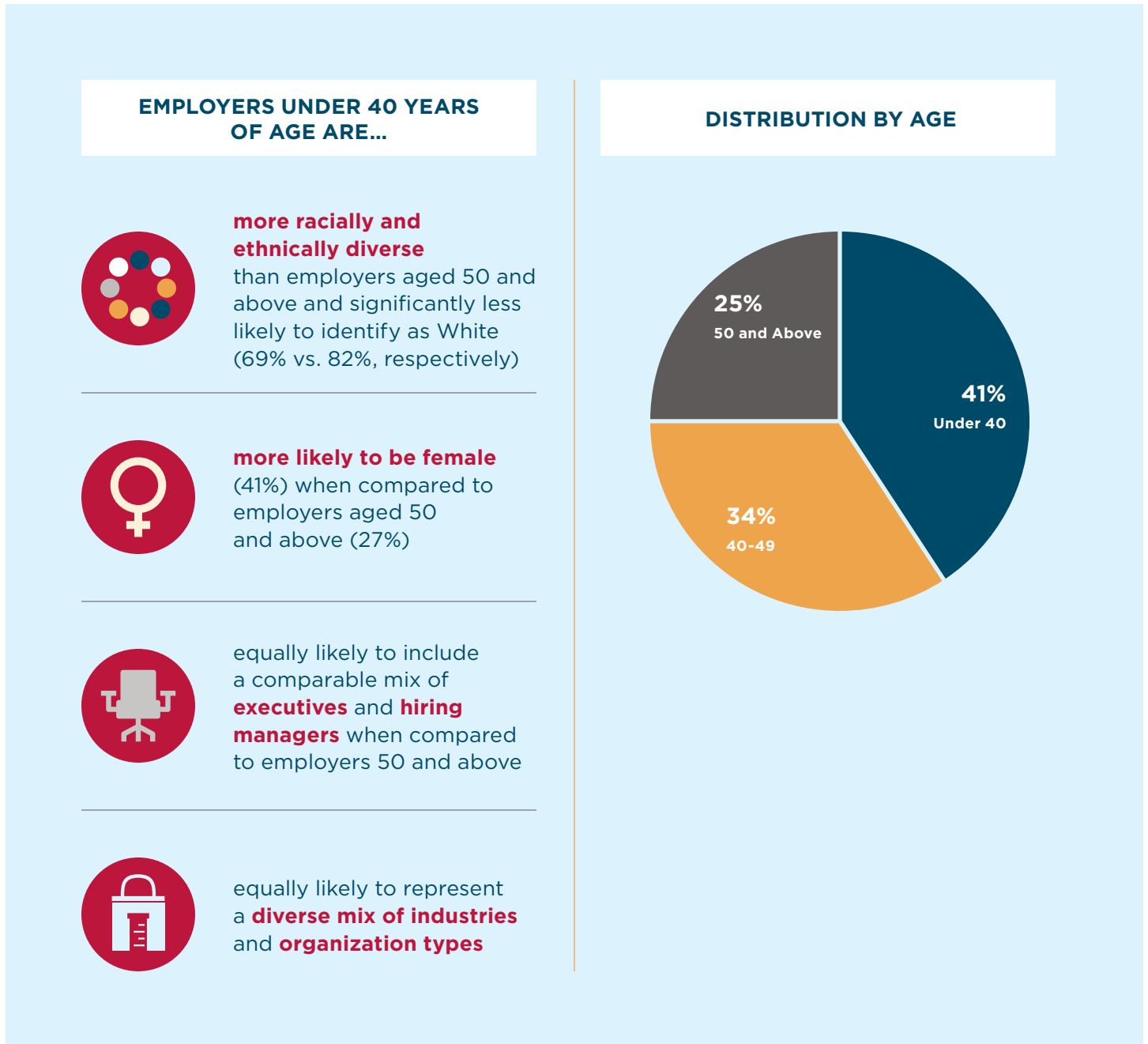
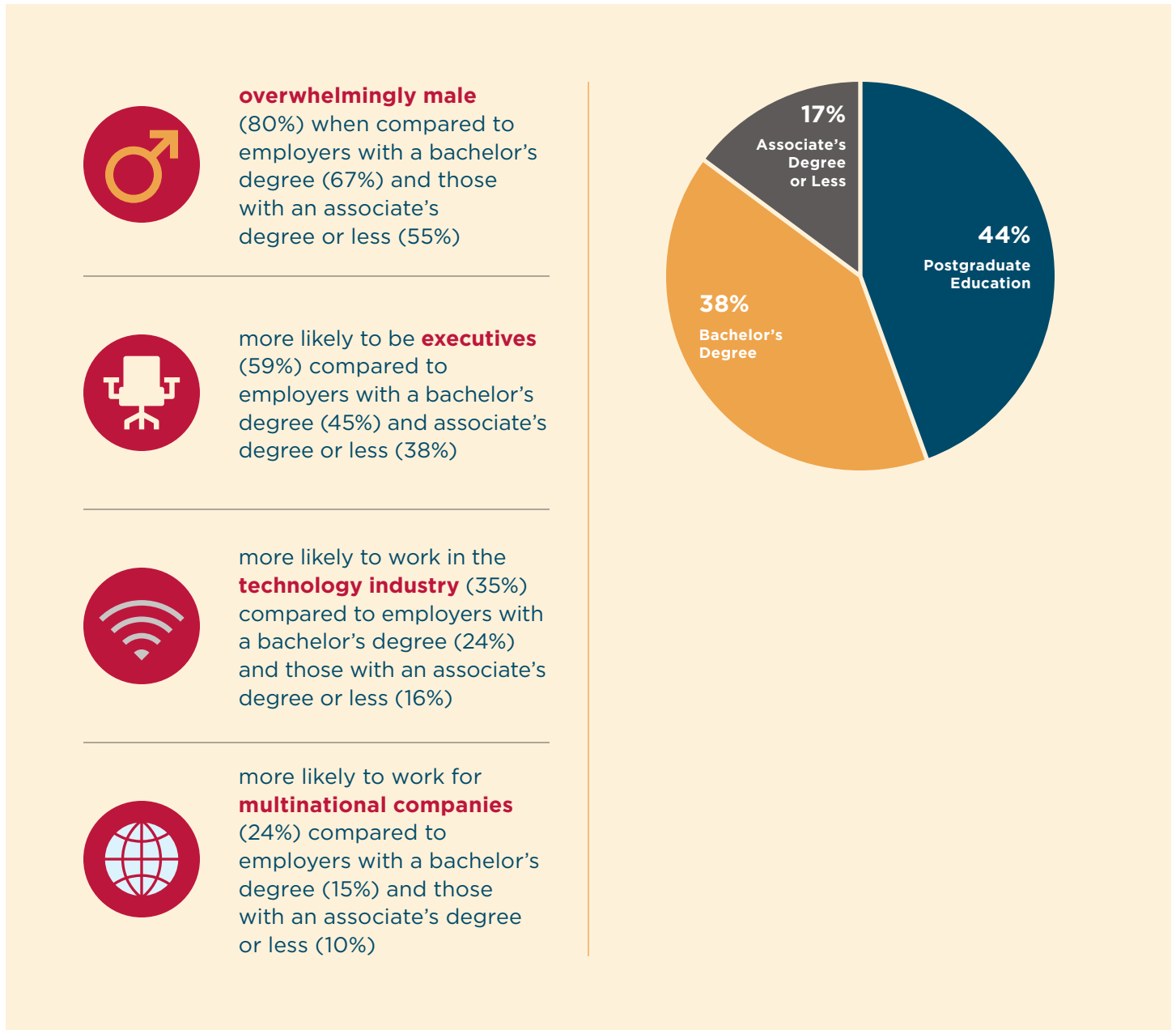


FIGURE 14

Profile of participating employers by education



Younger employers and employers with higher levels of educational attainment have more favorable perceptions of both the value of the college degree and graduates' preparedness for workforce success.

While more than half of all employers under the age of forty (54 percent) believe that getting a college degree is “definitely” worth the investment of time and money, fewer than two in five employers aged fifty and above (39 percent) agree. Yet, employers under forty also account for the highest percentage with “very little” confidence in higher education (17 percent, as compared to just 3 percent of those over fifty).¹ One possible explanation may be that employers under the age of forty are the oldest millennials. Members of this generation, the most highly educated in US history, may be expected to value the college degree,² but they also came of age during a financial crisis that produced widespread skepticism in public institutions.³

Perhaps as a result of spending the most time in higher education, employers with postgraduate education value the college degree more highly than those with lower levels of educational attainment and also have greater confidence in higher education as a public institution. Three in five employers who have at least some postgraduate education believe that getting a college degree is “definitely” worth the investment of time and money, which is 13 percentage points higher than the share of employers who hold a bachelor's degree and 31 points higher than the share of employers who hold an associate's degree or less. Employers with an associate's degree or less make up the largest share of employers who believe that getting a college degree or credential is “definitely not” worthwhile. Additionally, half of all employers with at least some postgraduate

education (51 percent) have “a great deal” of confidence in higher education. Only about one-third of employers with an associate's degree or less (31 percent) or a bachelors' degree (36 percent) agree.

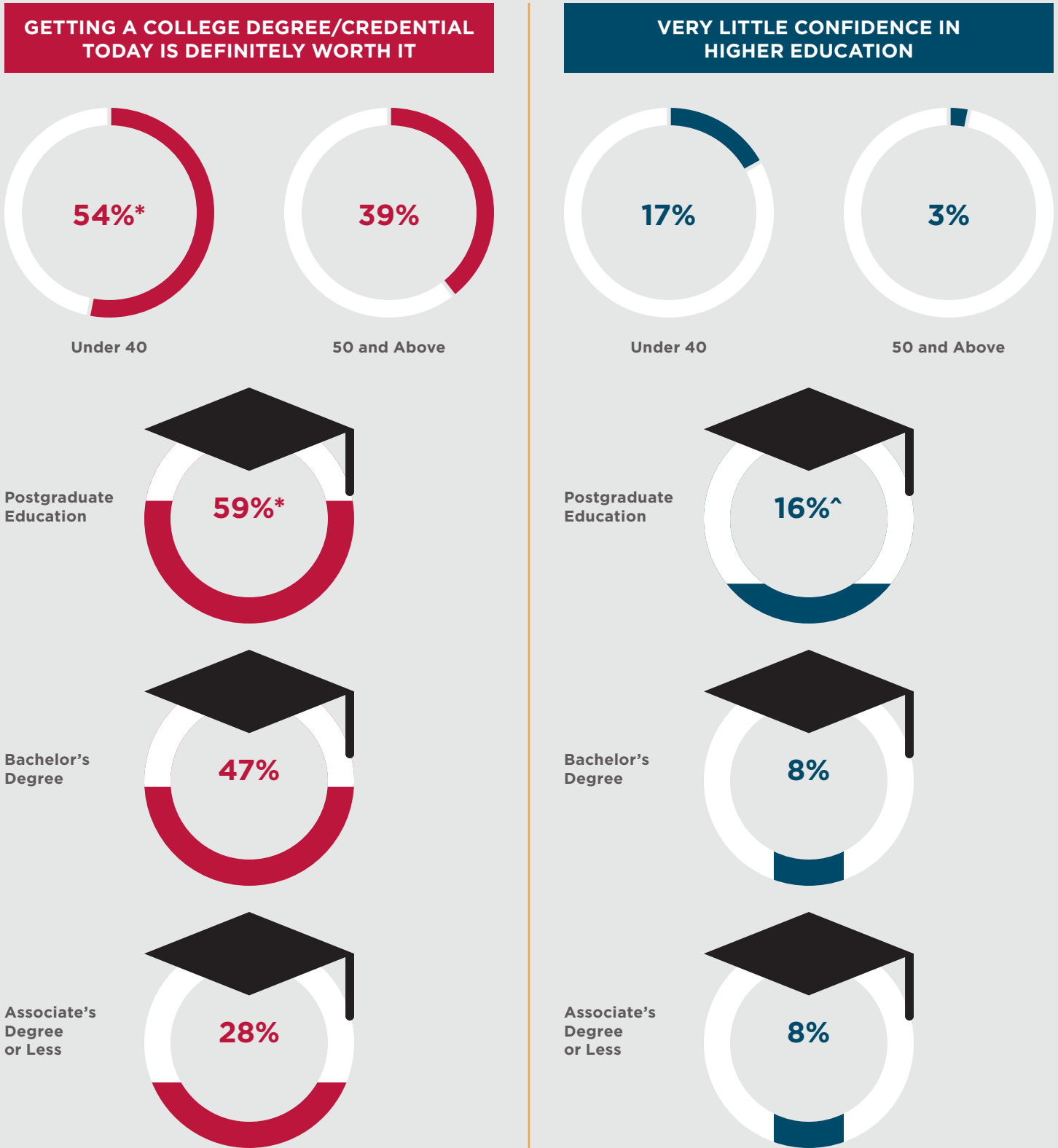
Employers under forty and employers with higher levels of educational attainment also tended to report the highest levels of satisfaction with college graduates' ability to apply skills and knowledge, communicate those skills, and be prepared to succeed (see fig. 16 and 17).

Employers under the age of forty and employers with at least some postgraduate education report relatively high levels of satisfaction with college graduates' skills and preparedness to succeed in the workplace (see fig. 18).

A significantly higher percentage of employers with at least some postgraduate education thought “all” recent graduates possessed the full set of skills and knowledge to succeed in entry-level positions than employers with bachelor's or associate's degrees or less. Though a higher percentage of employers with at least some postgraduate education believed “all” college graduates had the skills and knowledge to advance or be promoted than those with bachelor's or associate's degrees or less, these differences were not significant.⁶

FIGURE 15

Employers under 40 and employers with at least some postgraduate education are significantly more likely to report that a college degree is “definitely worth it” but also to say they have “very little confidence” in higher education.



* Significantly different from both bachelor's degree and associate's degree or less.

^ Significantly different from bachelor's degree only.

FIGURE 16

Percentages of employers by age and education who are “very satisfied” with college graduates’ ability to apply the skills and knowledge learned in college to complex problems in the workplace.

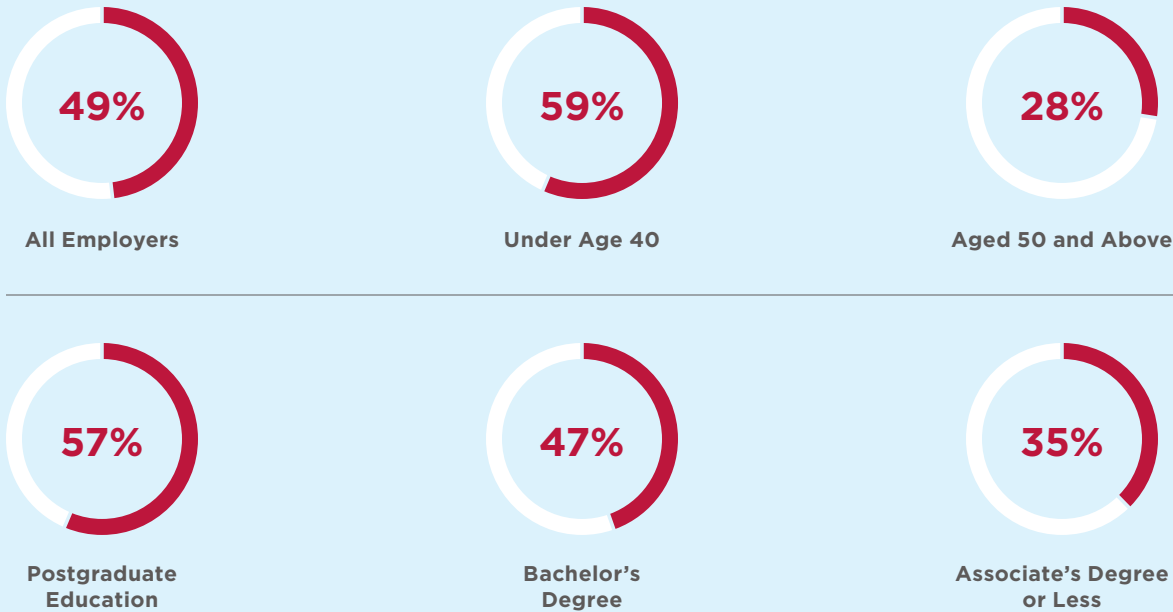


FIGURE 17

Percentages of employers by age and education who are “very satisfied” with the effectiveness of recent college graduates in communicating the key skills and knowledge they have gained in college⁴

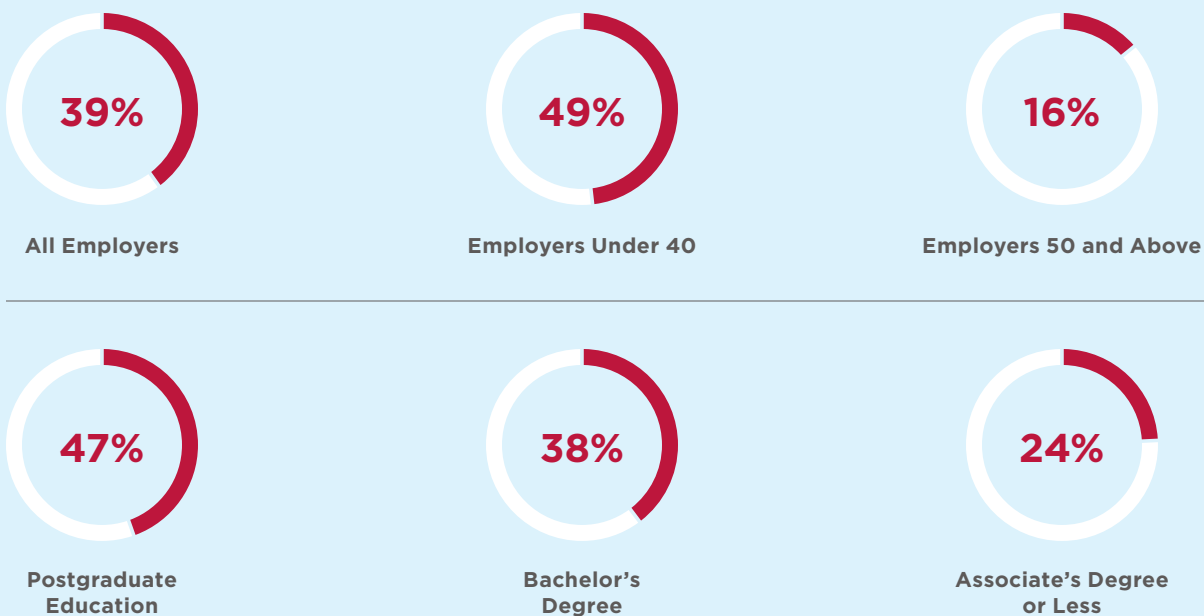
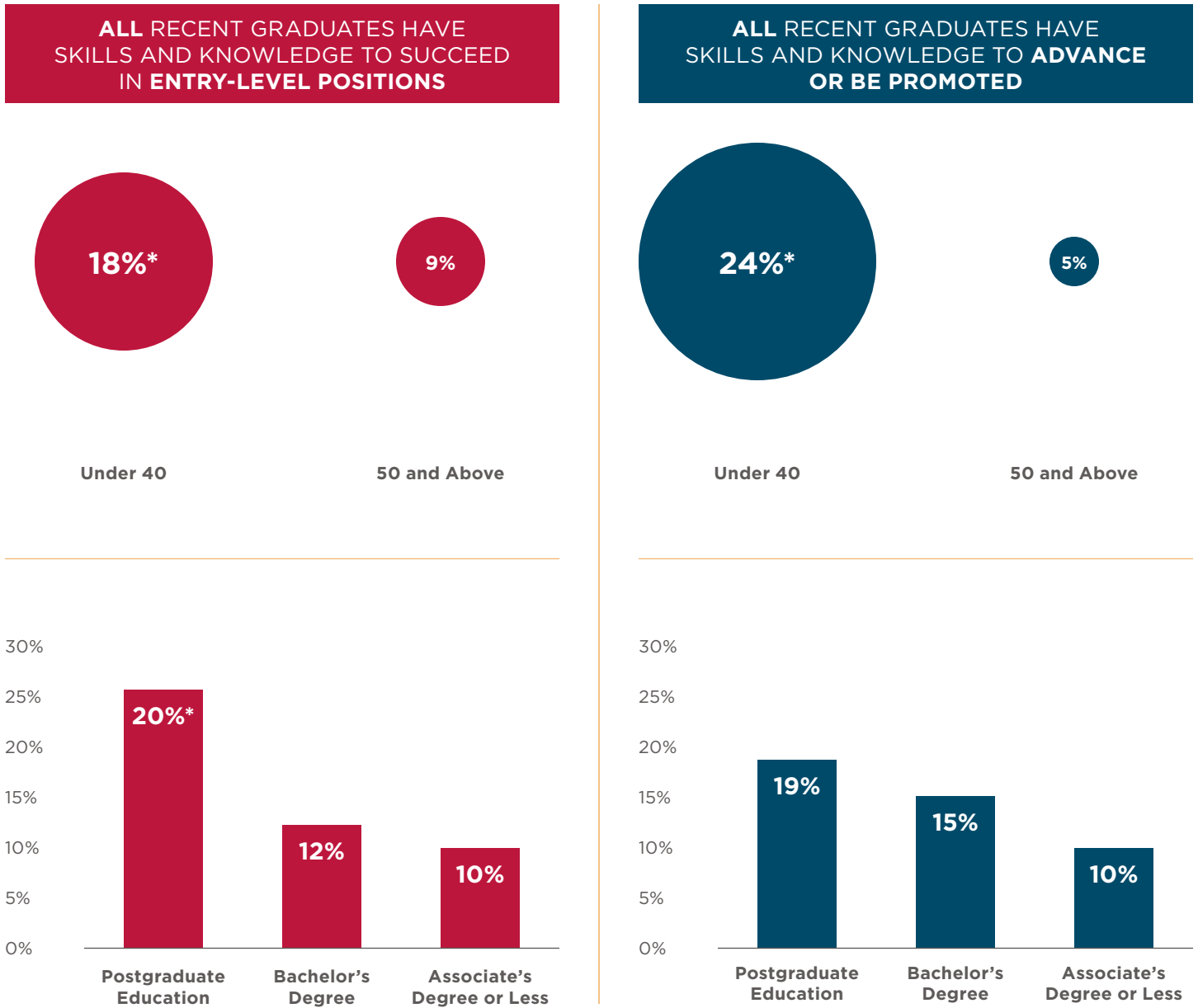


FIGURE 18

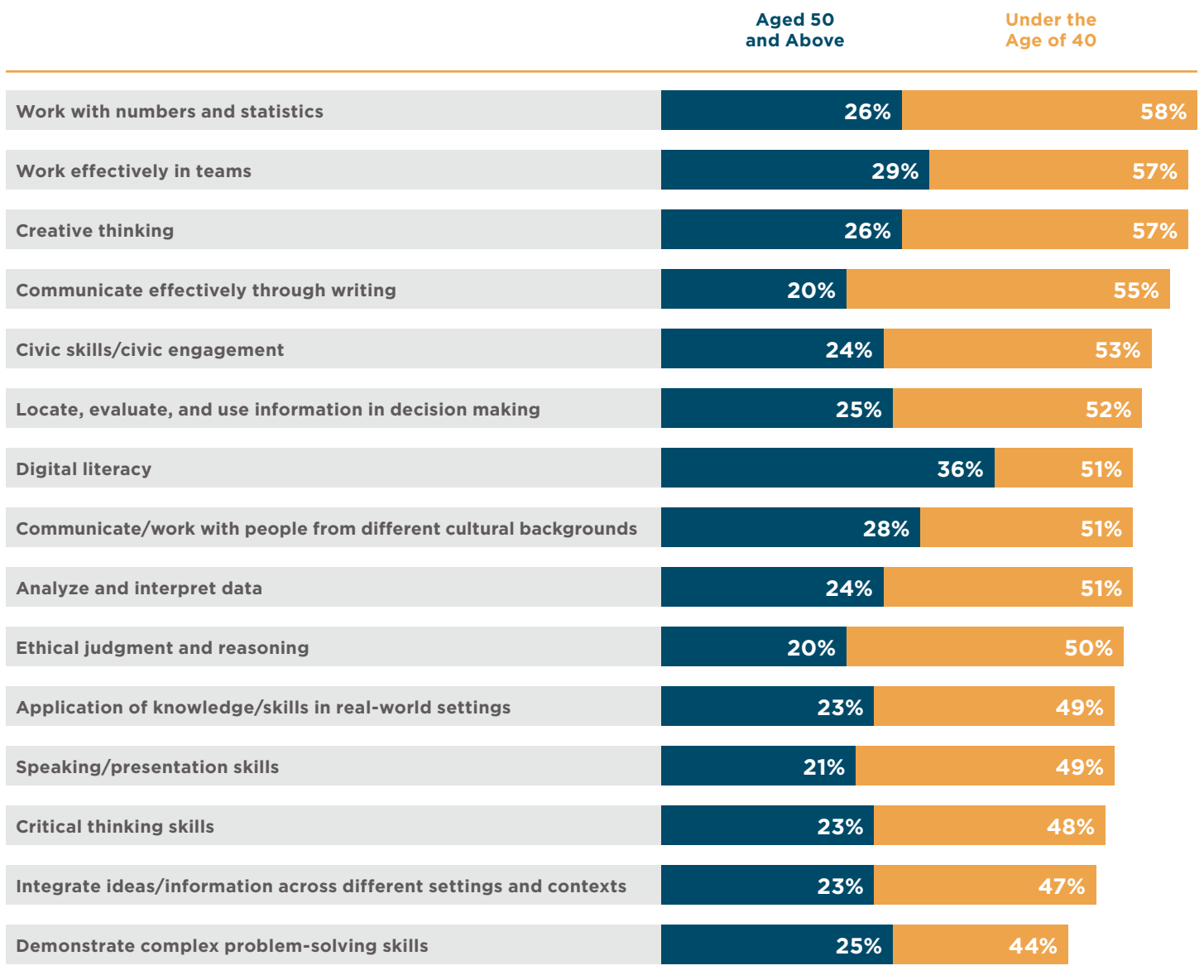
Employers under 40 and employers with postgraduate education are more likely to report that “all” college graduates possess the skills and knowledge needed to succeed or to advance in their jobs.



*Significant difference from employers with bachelor's and associate's degrees or less.

FIGURE 19

Higher percentages of employers under 40 view college graduates as “very prepared” in skills than those aged 50 and above.



Employer views of the skills and mindsets needed to succeed in the workplace vary significantly by age and level of educational attainment.

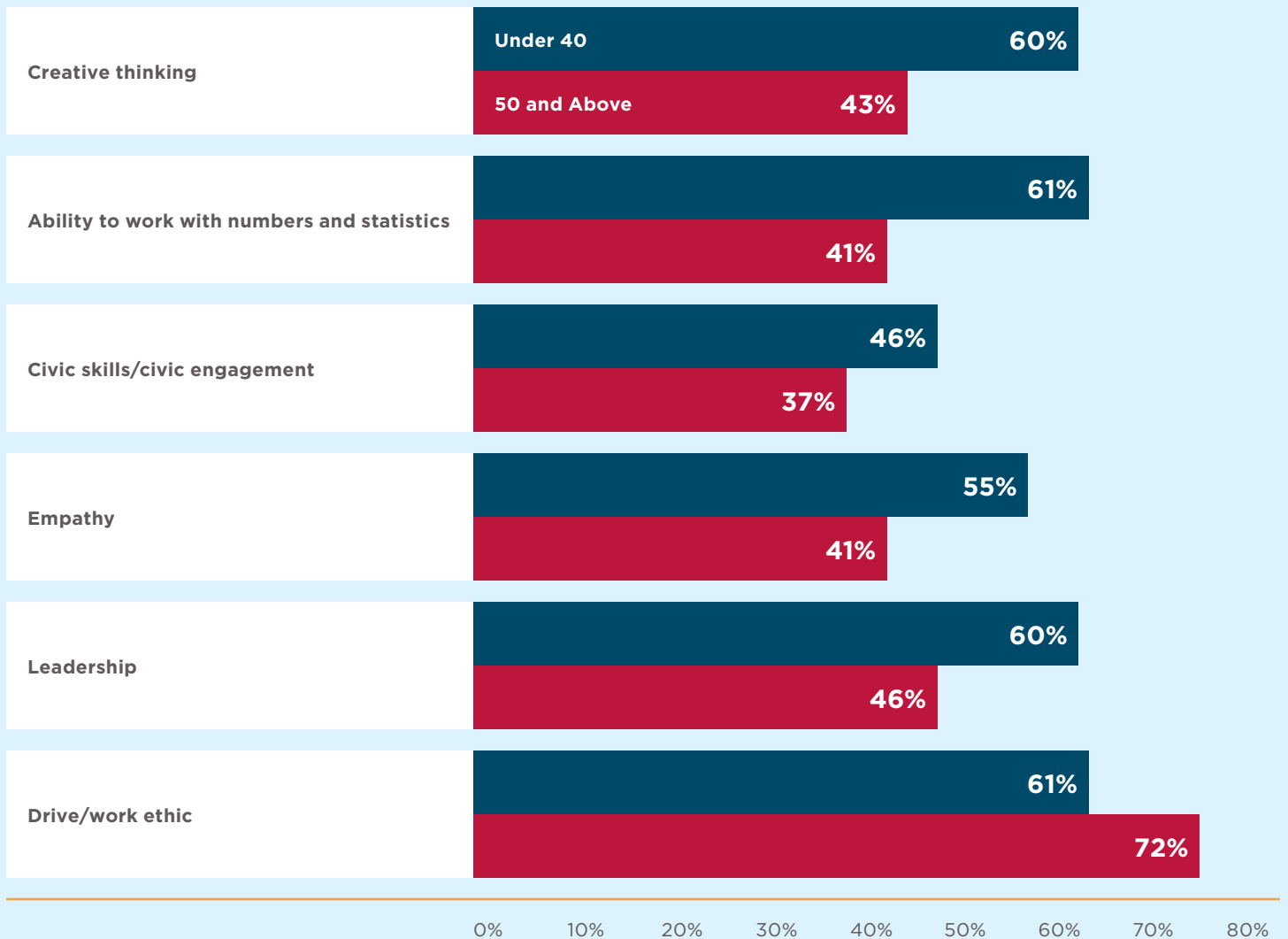
The largest and most consistent age gaps point to generational differences in how employers view the future of work. The roughly 20 percentage point difference in the ratings of “creativity,” “the ability to work with numbers and statistics,” and civic skills as “very important” between employers under the age of forty and those fifty and above may signal the ways in which younger employers envision an economy increasingly driven by creative problem-solving, data-driven decisions, and civically minded leaders (see fig. 20).

Additionally, employers under 40 were more likely to view empathy and leadership as “very important” for college graduates than employers aged 50 and above. Though a majority of both younger and older employers indicated it is very important for college graduates to possess “work ethic/drive,” this language resonated with a significantly higher percentage of employers aged fifty and older.

Differences between employers by educational attainment on the importance of skills were consistently slight and not statistically significant. The same was largely true with regard to aptitudes and mindsets. However, a significantly higher percentage of employers with at least some postgraduate education indicated “leadership” as “very important” when hiring relative to employers with bachelor’s degrees or with associate’s degrees or less.

FIGURE 20

Significant differences in the skills and mindsets deemed to be “very important” for college graduates among younger and older employers.



Younger employers and employers with higher levels of educational attainment see greater value in civic skill-building, community-based and global experiences, and the civic and liberal arts emphases of a liberal education.

Among the most consistent findings of this survey are the significant differences among employers with respect to the value they place on college graduates' civic and community-based experiences. Employers aged fifty years and older rank these experiences significantly lower than do employers under forty and those between the ages of forty and forty-nine. However, the largest gaps exist between the oldest and youngest age cohorts. For example, a far higher proportion of employers under forty say they would be "much more likely" to consider college graduates with any one of the high-impact experiences, as compared to the proportion of employers aged fifty and above.⁸ Yet this difference is greatest with respect to graduates' completion of community-based or global experiences and faculty-led research experiences (see fig. 21).

With regard to the attributes or characteristics of a college education that most contribute to long-term career success, the largest differences between employers under 40 and those 50 and older were with regard to an "emphasis on global issues," "community engagement," fostering a sense of "social justice," and exposure to "liberal arts disciplines" (see fig. 22).

Though differences were not as significant as with age, a significantly higher percent of employers with at least some postgraduate education indicated they would be much more likely to consider hiring college graduates with global or community experiences, who had completed a portfolio, or who had done research with a faculty member, relative to employers with bachelor's degrees or associate's degrees or less (see fig. 23).

Finally, employers with at least some postgraduate education are significantly more likely than employers with lower levels of educational attainment to find community engagement, a focus on global issues, fostering a sense of social justice, and an emphasis on liberal arts disciplines to be "very important" for long-term career success, though the differences are less pronounced than those between employer age cohorts (see fig. 24).⁹

FIGURE 21

Percentages of employers who indicated they would be “much more likely to consider” hiring a college graduate with the following experiences.

	ALL EMPLOYERS	EMPLOYERS UNDER 40	EMPLOYERS 50 AND ABOVE
Completion of an internship or apprenticeship	49%	51%	43%
Experience working in community settings with people from diverse backgrounds or cultures	47%	53%	34%
Had a job or engaged in work-study while in college	46%	50%	33%
Completion of a portfolio of work showcasing skills and integrating college experiences	45%	51%	33%
Exposure to global learning experiences	44%	51%	23%
Experience working with mentors and/or individualized advisors	43%	47%	33%
Completion of multiple courses requiring significant writing assignments	42%	49%	28%
Completion of a community-based or service-learning project	41%	54%	20%
Completion of a research project done collaboratively with faculty	41%	53%	21%
Completion of an advanced, comprehensive project in the senior year	41%	50%	29%

*All differences are statistically significant except with regard to internships.

FIGURE 22

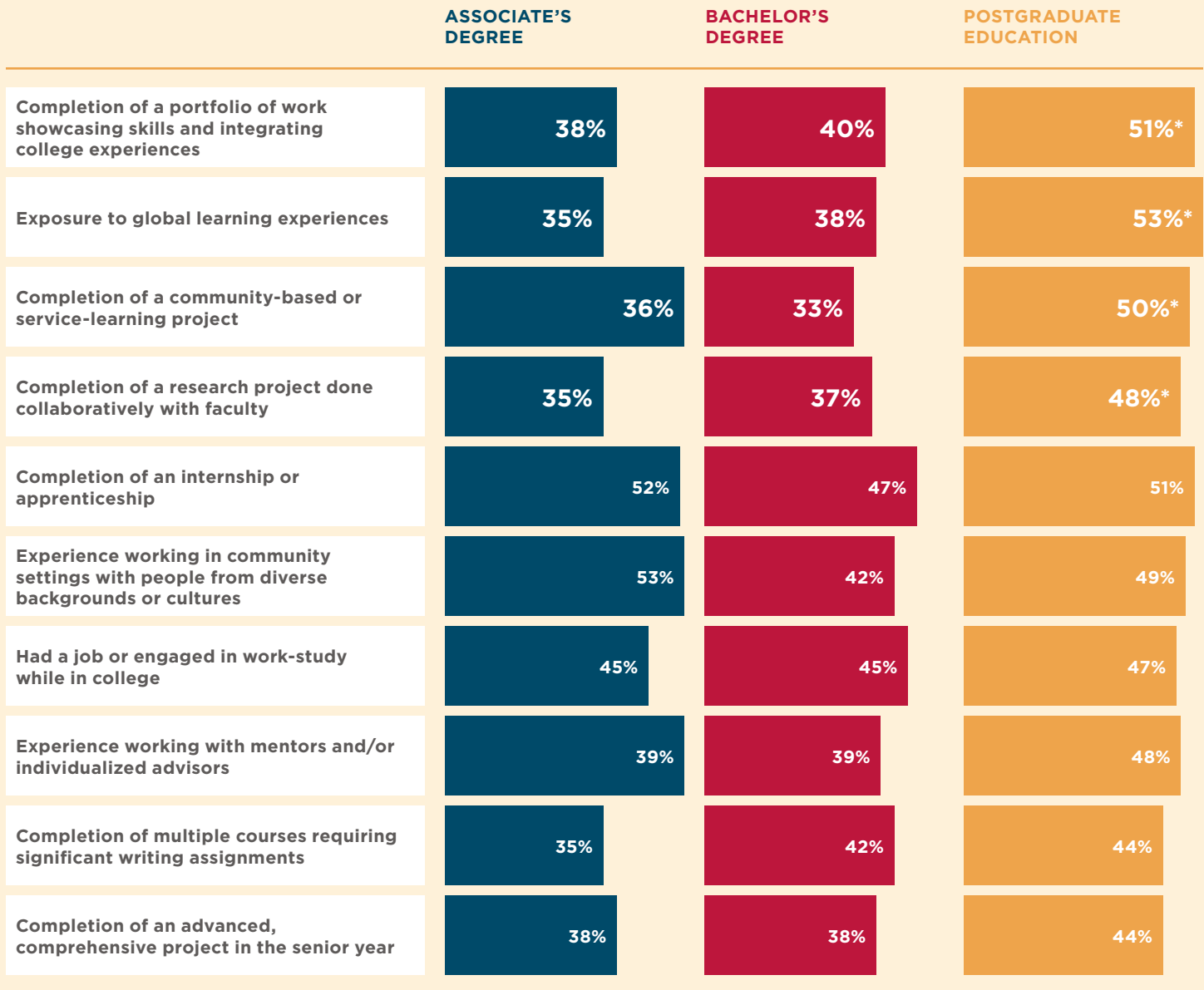
Employers under 40 tend to view a college education focused on breadth of experiences and community engagement as very important for long-term career success (and technical skills matter, too).

	ALL EMPLOYERS	EMPLOYERS UNDER 40	EMPLOYERS 50 AND ABOVE
An emphasis on “non-technical” skills	52%	55%	43%*
Adequately building technical skills for employment	52%	58%	41%*
Encouraging students to engage in communities	46%	53%	34%*
Exposure to a wide variety of academic topics and disciplines	44%	50%	34%*
Encouraging students to think for themselves	55%	56%	55%
Providing students with a well-rounded education	52%	57%	48%
Producing versatile students who can adapt to problems as they arise	51%	52%	49%
Encouraging interactions with diverse groups of people	51%	54%	44%
Exposure to STEM fields	45%	50%	34%
Fostering a sense of social justice	44%	49%	31%
A focus on global issues	41%	49%	24%
An emphasis on liberal arts disciplines	36%	43%	19%

* Significant differences between 50 and above and under 40.

FIGURE 23

Employers with postgraduate education are much more likely to consider hiring college graduates with a portfolio, global learning experiences, community-based projects, or collaborative research with faculty.



* Percentage is significantly higher compared to employers with bachelor's degrees and associate's degrees or less.

FIGURE 24

Employers with postgraduate education are more likely to view a college education focused on global issues, social justice, and community engagement as very important for long-term career success (and technical skills matter, too).

	POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION	BACHELOR'S DEGREE	ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE OR LESS
Adequately building technical skills for employment	57%*	49%	44%
Encouraging students to engage in communities	54%^	39%	40%
Fostering a sense of social justice	47%*	44%	34%
A focus on global issues	47%^	37%	30%
An emphasis on liberal arts disciplines	44%^	33%	25%
Encouraging students to think for themselves	57%	54%	54%
An emphasis on “non-technical” skills	51%	51%	56%
Providing students with a well-rounded education	55%	47%	54%
Producing versatile students who can adapt to problems as they arise	53%	51%	49%
Encouraging interactions with diverse groups of people	53%	50%	48%
Exposure to STEM fields	49%	41%	44%
Exposure to a wide variety of academic topics and disciplines	48%	43%	38%

^ Significant differences vs. employers with bachelor’s degrees and associate’s degrees or less.

* Significant differences vs. employers with associate’s degrees only.

Collectively, the findings presented in this report

demonstrate that employers from a range of backgrounds and industries seek employees with a particular type of postsecondary education—one in which students engage “in forms of inquiry that train the intellect through a focus on real-world problems that draw the learner into relationship with others.”¹

In other words, employers favor liberally educated job candidates. This endorsement of the skills, experiences, and goals that characterize a contemporary liberal education provides renewed support for efforts at colleges and universities to ensure that all students have access to this type of education. At a time of great change in American higher education and in the global economy, this report strongly suggests that a liberal education will pay off for students on the road ahead.

The following recommendations are provided to help campus leaders, practitioners, and educators translate the findings of this study into practical action steps for their campuses:

- **Equip students to name and reflect upon the skills that matter.** Employers widely endorse the skills developed by a liberal education, which also broadly align with departmental goals and those of general education programs. By being explicit about what those skills are, students can more easily communicate how their education, regardless of their chosen major, connects to workforce needs.
- **Make mindsets and aptitudes an explicit part of learning, inside and outside the classroom.** Dispositions, ways of knowing, and habits of mind are not solely innate traits. As with other skills and abilities, a college education cultivates these capacities through both curricular and cocurricular learning. Making these mindsets and aptitudes explicit both inside and outside the classroom will help students better understand what they can contribute as professionals.
- **Assess skills and mindsets to ensure college graduates are prepared to succeed and to advance.** Employers have consistently reported that although a solid majority of college graduates may be prepared to succeed in entry-level positions, far fewer have the full set of skills needed to advance or be promoted. The only way for campus leaders and educators to truly know if students are prepared to enter the workforce is to assess where students are on outcomes—at the beginning, middle, and end of the college journey.
- **Ensure high-impact learning experiences can be equitably accessed by students from all backgrounds and that students are supported to succeed in these experiences.** Job candidates with applied learning experiences have an edge in the hiring process. It is not enough simply to make these learning experiences available on campus. Equity in access to, and success in, these experiences must be a priority for campuses that are committed to enabling students to flourish in college and in their careers.
- **Give students a way to tell employers their story.** Transcripts are good, but ePortfolios are better. When done well, ePortfolios provide a space for students to reflect on their learning, connect outcomes to selected work samples, showcase their experiences, and curate all of this into a professional portfolio they can use on the job market.
- **Leverage general education to reinforce why breadth and depth of learning matter.** The skills that matter to employers are not developed within a single course or even within a single major. General education provides the entry point and foundational pathway for developing the skills, mindsets, and aptitudes that matter for workplace success. But that pathway must be aligned with majors to promote ongoing skill development, from cornerstone to capstone.

PART ONE

- 1 Employers under 40 also had a higher percentage of respondents who indicated “a great deal of confidence” in higher education, as compared to employers 50 and older (42% vs. 38%), but this difference was not significant.
- 2 <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>
- 3 https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/IOPSpring15PollExecSumm.pdf
- 4 Employers under 40 were more likely than those aged 50 or above to find both transcripts and ePortfolios very useful. Forty-nine percent of employers under 40 viewed transcripts as “very useful,” as compared to only 11% of employers fifty and older. Older employers’ lack of enthusiasm for transcripts does not carry through to electronic portfolios, however. Nearly one third of employers aged 50 and above (30%) reported that ePortfolios are very useful for evaluating applicants.
- 5 Similar to employers under the age of 40, employers with postgraduate education found both transcripts and ePortfolios more useful than did employers with lower levels of educational attainment.
- 6 Differences by education do become significant if combining categories of “all” graduates with “most” graduates (i.e. 62% of employers with at least some postgraduate education believed all/most graduates have skills to advance or be promoted vs. 49% of those with bachelor’s degrees and 46% of those with associate’s degrees or less). No significant differences by education level were found among employers regarding college graduates’ ability to succeed in entry-level positions.
- 7 Significantly more employers with postgraduate education reported “curiosity for lifelong learning” as “very important” than employers with bachelor’s degrees. When combining categories of “very” and “somewhat important,” employers with postgraduate education have significantly higher combined percentages on lifelong learning, as compared with employers with associate’s degrees or less.
- 8 The only difference that was not statistically significant was with regard to internships.
- 9 A significantly greater percentage of employers with postgraduate education also rated “adequately building technical skills for employment” as “very important” than did employers who hold an associate’s degree or less.

PART TWO

- 1 Employers under 40 also had a higher percentage of respondents who indicated “a great deal of confidence” in higher education, as compared to employers 50 and older (42% vs. 38%), but this difference was not significant.
- 2 <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>
- 3 https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/IOPSpring15PollExecSumm.pdf
- 4 Employers under 40 were more likely than those aged 50 or above to find both transcripts and ePortfolios very useful. Forty-nine percent of employers under 40 viewed transcripts as “very useful,” as compared to only 11% of employers fifty and older. Older employers’ lack of enthusiasm for transcripts does not carry through to electronic portfolios, however. Nearly one third of employers aged 50 and above (30%) reported that ePortfolios are very useful for evaluating applicants.
- 5 Similar to employers under the age of 40, employers with at least some postgraduate education found both transcripts and ePortfolios more useful than did employers with lower levels of educational attainment.
- 6 No significant differences among employers with different levels of educational attainment were found with regard to their attitudes on college graduates’ ability to succeed in entry-level positions.
- 7 Significantly more employers with postgraduate education reported “curiosity for lifelong learning” as “very important” than employers with bachelor’s degree. When combining categories of “very” and “somewhat important,” employers with postgraduate education have significantly higher combined percentages on lifelong learning, as compared with employers with associate’s degrees or less.
- 8 The only difference that was not statistically significant was with regard to internships.
- 9 A significantly greater percentage of employers with postgraduate education also rated “adequately building technical skills for employment” as “very important” than did employers who hold an associate’s degree or less.

CONCLUSION

- 1 AAC&U, *What Liberal Education Looks Like: What It Is, Who It’s For, and Where It Happens* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2020), 9.

