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# Universities at a Crossroads:

## Balancing Workforce Readiness and Higher Education's Broader Purposes

Universities today face increasing pressure to align undergraduate education with workforce needs. Rising concerns about college costs, labor shortages, and employment outcomes have intensified demands that higher education demonstrate its value through career preparation and workforce development.

While these concerns are understandable, they raise a larger question about the purpose of higher education:

> *How can universities prepare students to succeed within existing occupations and institutions while also preparing them to improve and transform those occupations and institutions in ways that better serve society?*

This brief examines the growing emphasis on workforce readiness and argues that the central challenge facing higher education is not choosing between workforce preparation and broader educational purposes, but determining how best to achieve both.

### Forces Driving the Shift Toward Workforce Alignment

Several economic, political, and social forces are converging to encourage universities to become more directly involved in workforce preparation. Together, these forces are reshaping expectations about the purpose, accountability, and outcomes of undergraduate education.

- Students, families, employers, and policymakers are increasingly concerned about the return on investment associated with higher education. As college costs rise and student debt remains a concern, employment outcomes, earnings, and career preparation have become central measures of institutional accountability. Many stakeholders want universities to demonstrate clearer pathways from education to employment that support economic mobility and long-term career success (Eisner, 2025).
- Employers often report that graduates lack some of the competencies needed for workplace success. Concerns include technical skills and digital literacy, as well as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving. In a rapidly changing economy, employers increasingly seek graduates who can contribute effectively from the outset while continuing to learn and adjust to new circumstances (Hoteit et al., 2023).
- Persistent workforce shortages in fields such as health care, behavioral and mental health, education, public health, information technology, and cybersecurity have intensified calls for universities to increase the number of graduates in areas viewed as essential to economic prosperity and societal well-being. These shortages are often cited as evidence that higher education should play a more direct role in workforce development (Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2024).
- In many states, government accountability and funding policies increasingly incorporate employment outcomes, completion rates, workforce alignment, and return-on-investment measures when evaluating institutional performance, allocating funding, or informing students and families.

### An Ongoing Debate

Tension between vocational preparation and broader educational purposes has existed throughout the history of American higher education. Universities have repeatedly been called upon to respond to economic and workforce needs, from the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of the nineteenth century to the expansion of professional education after World War II and the more recent emphasis on STEM education and workforce development.

Today's emphasis on workforce readiness is the latest expression of a longstanding debate about the purposes of higher education. Should universities primarily advance economic goals, foster informed and engaged citizens, promote intellectual inquiry, serve broader societal needs, or seek to balance all of these purposes? Historically, colleges and universities have attempted to pursue multiple purposes simultaneously rather than choose among them (Newman, 1852/1994).

### Arguments for Greater Workforce Involvement

Advocates for a stronger university role in workforce preparation typically advance five major arguments.

- *Improved Employment Outcomes.* Aligning curricula with workforce needs is seen as helping graduates secure employment more quickly and improve long-term career prospects. Supporters argue that stronger connections between academic programs and employment opportunities can ease students' transition from college to work and increase economic mobility (Eisner, 2025).
- *Stronger Return on Investment*. Students increasingly view career preparation as a central reason for attending college. Workforce-oriented programs and clearer connections between fields of study and career opportunities are viewed as helping students make more informed educational decisions and gain greater confidence that their educational investments will yield tangible benefits (Eisner, 2025).
- *Addressing Critical Workforce Needs*. Universities are viewed as playing an essential role in reducing shortages in high-need sectors. Expanding educational pathways into STEM fields, health care, behavioral and mental health, education, public health, and public service professions is frequently cited as necessary for addressing workforce shortages that affect economic prosperity and societal well-being (Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2024).
- *Broader Accountability*. Workforce outcome indicators are seen as expanding traditional measures of university performance and increasing accountability to students, families, employers, policymakers, and taxpayers. Supporters argue that employment and earnings data provide important evidence about whether institutions are meeting public expectations (Eisner, 2025).
- *Increased Experiential Learning.* Greater emphasis on internships, apprenticeships, field experiences, and community-based projects is viewed as helping students integrate theory and practice while gaining relevant career experience. Such opportunities are often associated with stronger workforce preparation and smoother transitions into employment (Hoteit et al., 2023).

### Concerns About Potential Risks and Drawbacks

Those who question an expanded workforce role for universities acknowledge the importance of career preparation but raise several concerns.

- *It Narrows the Mission of Higher Education*. Universities have long been understood as institutions devoted not only to career preparation but also to intellectual development, civic engagement, ethical reasoning, informed citizenship, and the advancement of knowledge (Newman, 1852/1994; Bok, 2006; Brint, 2019). Critics worry that an excessive emphasis on employment outcomes will diminish these broader educational purposes and reduce higher education to a primarily economic enterprise (Bok, 2006; Collini, 2012).
- *It Chases Short-Term Labor Markets*. Workforce needs can change rapidly, particularly in an era of accelerating technological change and economic fluctuations. Programs designed in response to current labor shortages can lose relevance as industries evolve, technologies advance, and occupational demands shift (Hoteit et al., 2023).

• *It Marginalizes the Liberal Arts*. Disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, and the arts are often viewed as having less direct workforce relevance. Defenders of these fields emphasize that they foster critical thinking, communication, creativity, perspective taking, and ethical reasoning, capacities that employers frequently value and that many educators regard as essential for democratic participation and lifelong learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021; Nussbaum, 2010). Critics fear that workforce-centered reforms will weaken institutional support for these disciplines and narrow students' educational experiences (Collini, 2012; Nussbaum, 2010).

• *It Increases Employer Influence Over Curriculum.* As universities become more responsive to labor-market demands, some fear that academic freedom and institutional independence will be compromised. Concerns include the possibility that short-term economic priorities could increasingly shape curricula, limiting universities' ability to pursue knowledge, foster critical inquiry, and challenge prevailing assumptions (American Association of University Professors, 2015; Bok, 2006).

• *It Exacerbates Potential Inequities*. Evidence suggests that less-selective institutions often respond more strongly to labor-market pressures than highly selective universities. This raises concerns about the emergence of a two-tiered system in which some students receive a broad liberal education while others are channeled into narrower occupational pathways (Conzelmann et al., 2023; Hall, 2024).

• *It Emphasizes Adaptation More Than Improvement*. Much of the workforce-readiness movement assumes that the primary purpose of higher education is to prepare students to function effectively within existing occupations and institutions. Critics argue that many of society's most pressing challenges stem not only from workforce shortages but also from shortcomings in the systems themselves. Schools struggle to meet the needs of all students. Health and behavioral and mental health systems continue to face problems related to access, quality, coordination, and equity. Public agencies wrestle with persistent social and community challenges. From this perspective, universities should prepare graduates not only to enter these systems but also to analyze their limitations, develop innovations, and lead efforts for improving and transforming them.

### Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence adds a new dimension to this debate. On one hand, it increases pressure for universities to ensure that graduates possess workforce-relevant competencies that align with changing labor-market demands. On the other hand, because AI is likely to reshape many occupations in ways that remain difficult to predict, it reinforces the importance of broadly applicable capacities such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning, creativity, communication, adaptability, and lifelong learning.

The more uncertain the future of work becomes, the greater the value of educational experiences that prepare graduates not only for existing jobs but also for occupations, challenges, and opportunities that have yet to emerge.

## A More Fundamental Concern: *Preparing Students for Success and System Improvement*

Much of the workforce-readiness debate focuses on how effectively universities prepare students for existing careers. While important, that framing is too narrow. The central issue is not whether universities should prepare students for productive careers. Most observers agree that they should (Eisner, 2025; Hoteit et al., 2023). The more important question is how workforce preparation should be conceived and pursued.

> ***How can universities prepare students* to succeed within existing occupations and institutions while also equipping them to improve those occupations and institutions over time?**

Preparing students for workforce success and preparing them to improve society are often treated as competing goals. In reality, they are deeply interconnected. Society needs graduates who can perform effectively in existing professional roles. It also needs graduates who can identify problems, develop innovative solutions, and strengthen the systems and organizations on which societal well-being depends.

Indeed, much of today's discussion centers on workforce supply. Yet far less attention is devoted to workforce effectiveness. Expanding the number of graduates may help address labor shortages, but it does not necessarily improve the systems, organizations, and professions in which those graduates will work.

Society needs competent teachers, health professionals, behavioral and mental health practitioners, public servants, business leaders, scientists, and technologists. It also needs professionals who can identify shortcomings in existing systems, generate innovative solutions, and lead efforts to make those systems more effective, equitable, and responsive to changing societal needs.

Framed in this way, workforce preparation and broader educational purposes become complementary rather than competing goals. The challenge is determining how best to prepare graduates both to succeed in the world as it is and to contribute to shaping the world as it could be.

This distinction lies at the heart of longstanding debates about the purposes of higher education. Scholars have argued that universities are responsible not only for transmitting existing knowledge and professional practices but also for fostering critical inquiry, creativity, leadership, civic responsibility, ethical judgment, and the capacity to address society's most pressing challenges (Bok, 2006; Newman, 1852/1994; Nussbaum, 2010).

The distinction is especially important in fields such as behavioral and mental health, child and youth development, education, public health, and human services. Those working in these fields must master existing knowledge and evidence-based practices, but they must also confront persistent inequities, fragmented systems, and rapidly evolving community needs.

Students can be taught how to function effectively within existing systems and organizations. They can also be challenged to ask why systems remain fragmented, why services often fail to reach those most in need, why outcomes continue to fall short despite substantial investment, how prevention can be strengthened, and what changes are necessary to promote healthy development, learning, and well-being more effectively.

Addressing such questions requires more than technical competence. It requires critical thinking, ethical reasoning, creativity, communication skills, collaborative problem solving, and the capacity to envision and implement meaningful change. Not coincidentally, these are among the qualities long associated with the goals of liberal learning and civic education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021; Nussbaum, 2010).

Preparing students merely to enter existing fields is not the same as preparing them to improve those fields. Likewise, preparing students to work within existing institutions is not the same as preparing them to strengthen, redesign, and transform institutions that are failing to meet contemporary needs.

Ultimately, the central challenge for higher education is not choosing between workforce preparation and broader educational purposes. It is preparing graduates who can both succeed in their chosen field and contribute to improving the systems, organizations, and communities they serve. The most valuable workforce is not simply one that fills available positions, but one that has the knowledge, skills, judgment, and commitment needed to make those positions, organizations, and professions more effective in advancing societal well-being.

## The Current Response

Evidence suggests that colleges and universities are already adapting to labor-market pressures. A major national study found that four-year institutions respond significantly to changes in workforce demand. Using a novel measure of labor-market demand linked to specific fields of study, Conzelmann et al. (2023) estimated that a 1 percent increase in demand for workers in a field is associated with approximately a 1.3 percent increase in related undergraduate credits and degrees awarded.

These responses are particularly evident in workforce-oriented programs. Growth has been strongest in fields such as health care, behavioral and mental health, information technology, cybersecurity, education, and other areas experiencing strong labor-market demand (Conzelmann et al., 2023; Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2024).

Universities are also modifying how they prepare students. Increasing numbers of institutions are incorporating internships, apprenticeships, applied learning experiences, industry partnerships, professional certifications, and microcredentials into undergraduate programs in an effort to strengthen connections between academic study and employment opportunities (Hoteit et al., 2023).

Importantly, the current trend is not limited to the creation of new academic programs. It also includes efforts to reshape curricula, expand experiential learning, strengthen employer partnerships, and provide students with more direct pathways into the workforce. In many respects, the shift toward workforce responsiveness is already well underway.

The evidence suggests that universities are becoming more responsive to workforce needs while continuing to pursue their broader educational purposes. Most institutions seek to balance workforce preparation with intellectual development, research, civic engagement, and the advancement of knowledge. The central question, therefore, is not whether universities should contribute to workforce development. They already do. The more important question is how workforce preparation can help students both enter existing occupations successfully and contribute to improving the systems and institutions in which they will work.

## Implications for Human Services, Education, and Behavioral Health Programs

> The challenge of preparing students both for professional success and for system improvement is especially important in fields whose purpose is to promote human well-being and address persistent societal problems.

The growing emphasis on workforce alignment raises major questions for programs that prepare personnel for working in fields such as human services, education, and behavioral and mental health. As universities respond to demands for career readiness, there is a risk that programs will focus primarily on preparing students to function within existing systems rather than equipping them to improve and transform those systems (Adelman & Taylor, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

Workforce-oriented curricula that primarily emphasize current job requirements may unintentionally reinforce the status quo. Students may learn how systems operate without fully understanding their limitations, the factors contributing to persistent problems, or the changes needed to improve outcomes. Questions about workforce preparation therefore cannot be separated from questions about what future professionals need to know and be able to do to strengthen the quality, effectiveness, and design of the systems in which they will work.

Programs in behavioral and mental health, education, social work, counseling, public health, and related fields should help students understand the developmental, organizational, community, and policy factors that influence outcomes for children, youth, and families. They also should foster competencies related to prevention, early intervention, community engagement, collaborative problem solving, system redesign, and continuous improvement.

Universities therefore have a responsibility that extends beyond supplying workers for existing positions. They also have an opportunity to prepare graduates who can strengthen the quality, effectiveness, and equity of the systems in which they work. From this perspective, a central question is whether universities will prepare students primarily to adapt to existing institutions or to help improve them in ways that better promote healthy development, learning, well-being, and success for all children, youth, and families.

## Finding a Balance

The challenge for universities is not merely to prepare competent practitioners for today's workforce, but also to prepare graduates who can strengthen and improve the systems, organizations, and communities they will serve. The most constructive path forward is unlikely to involve choosing between workforce preparation and the broader purposes of higher education. Rather, it will require universities to prepare students for successful careers while fostering the critical thinking, ethical judgment, adaptability, civic responsibility, creativity, and lifelong learning capacities needed to navigate, improve, and help shape a rapidly changing world (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021; Bok, 2006; Hoteit et al., 2023).

Preparing students to improve systems should not be viewed as an alternative to workforce readiness. In many professions, the ability to identify problems, collaborate across organizational boundaries, and implement meaningful improvements is itself an increasingly important workforce competency.

Such an approach recognizes that employment outcomes matter. Students and families understandably expect higher education to provide pathways to meaningful careers and economic opportunity. At the same time, universities have long served purposes that extend beyond workforce preparation, including advancing knowledge, strengthening civic life, promoting ethical and informed decision making, and preparing graduates capable of addressing complex societal challenges (Bok, 2006; Brint, 2019).

## Concluding Comments

The fundamental question is no longer whether universities should contribute to workforce development. They already do. The more important question is how workforce preparation should be defined and whether it includes developing the knowledge, skills, judgment, and commitment needed to improve the systems and institutions in which graduates will work.

Framing the future of higher education as a choice between workforce preparation and broader education misses the larger challenge. Modern societies need graduates who possess occupational competence as well as critical thinking, ethical judgment, creativity, adaptability, and civic responsibility. They need graduates who can both succeed in their professions and help those professions evolve to meet changing societal needs.

In an era marked by rapid technological change, artificial intelligence, growing behavioral health concerns, increasing inequality, and persistent social challenges, society needs graduates who can do more than perform existing roles effectively. It needs graduates who can adapt, innovate, lead, and improve the systems, organizations, and communities on which societal well-being depends.

Ultimately, the question is not whether universities should prepare students for careers or for societal improvement. The challenge is how to prepare them for both.

**Universities at their best do not merely prepare students to fit into the world as it is; they prepare them to help create a better world.**

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