1. "Go to university! No, get a trade! How can young people survive when all the paths are landmined?" by Jason Okundaye

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/feb/23/young-people-university-trade-degree-graduate-jobs

2. "Colleges Must Deliver A First-Rate Education and Job Readiness Skills" by Eric Gertler

https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2026-04-10/colleges-must-deliver-a-first-rate-education-and-job-readiness-skills

3. "Building a Better College-to-Job Pipeline" by The Chronicle of Higher Education

Opinion Education

This article is more than **3 months old**

Go to university! No, get a trade! How can young people survive when all the paths are landmined?

Jason Okundaye

Is it to be a degree and heavy debt when graduate jobs are shrinking? Or forgoing a degree, knowing society still worships them? Confused, angry: who wouldn't be

Mon 23 Feb 2026 01.00 EST

Illustration: Joe Magee/The Guardian

Some months ago, I was at my old university, speaking to prospective sixth-form and college students about taking a degree in the arts and what future careers they could expect. It was a cohort of teenagers from underrepresented backgrounds: all of them had that glint of ambition in their eyes, a desire to better their circumstances. After the talk, they showed me their precocious LinkedIn profiles already advertising their talents to future employers. I expected them to ask what would be of more

value out of a degree in the arts or Stem, but I was unprepared for something more bracing: whether it was worth them going to university at all.

It is a question that keeps on rearing its head, as the graduate recruitment crisis and crippling student debts paint a picture of a pursuit with diminished returns. Those of us in the orbit of young people increasingly wonder whether we can, in good conscience, encourage them to go and get a degree. The options being presented increasingly look like snake oil, so is it any wonder that young people feel disillusioned and deceived?

There was a time when university was considered a reliable mechanism of social mobility. It was a philosophy inculcated under New Labour, with the then prime minister, Tony Blair, announcing in 1999 his intention for "50% of young adults going into higher education in the next century" (a figure that sat at just 20% in 1990). The idea was simple: a knowledge-based economy would create the jobs of the future, and it was the country's duty to prepare young people for it. This higher-skilled workforce would be able to better compete globally, translating to a boost in economic growth and a clear pathway for working-class young people to enter the middle class.

But the future is here and the jobs are not. University participation has increased, with the 50% target for those under the age of 30 reached in England in 2017/18. But the availability of professional opportunities has not kept pace: this is borne out by the worst graduate jobs market "in a generation", with AI threatening entry-level jobs and increasing uncertainty. Indeed, the "big four" accounting firms - Deloitte, EY, PwC and KPMG - have reduced their graduate recruitment numbers. The prospective students I met spoke with some warranted scepticism. I could tell them about the career that I, and peers, had made for ourselves with our degrees, but something was already clear to them. They could be bright and ambitious but one day they will enter a job market that is impenetrable. So, what should they do?

There is an emerging consensus that university numbers should fall, with almost half of the British public feeling that too many people go. One idea being floated is that, to beat the bots, young people should learn a trade instead: a computer cannot fix your piping or wire a house. Suella Braverman, Reform UK's education spokesperson, talks of upending Blair's goal so that 50% of young people go into trades instead (I am doubtful she imagines her own children becoming part of this group). The march of AI could put us on the path of a blue-collar revolution, so to speak.

Some of those who already chose that path are laughing. Joshua King, a London-based electrician who promotes choosing trades over university on his TikTok account, tells me that while he received good grades, he opted to learn a trade because it would give him practical experience and skills. He says that an increasing number of students and graduates are approaching him for job advice. "People feel like it's more achievable to go down that route and make good money," he says.

It is all well and good to tell young people to learn a trade, but the reality is that not all will be interested in such a career. It is also not to degrade the lot of a tradesperson to say that these roles are not held in the same social esteem - King tells me that he still braves judgmental looks from white-collar workers while on the train in scruffy work trousers. So young people get a mixed message from society: go to university and be burdened with debt, or become a plumber and we'll look down on you.

There is also the reality that some blue-collar jobs are at risk where automation is possible. As the Financial Times says: "There is little sign that any promised 'blue-collar boom' will be powerful enough to reverse the long-running decline of traditional skilled manual jobs." The data also still favours university for prosperity: 87.6% of working age graduates in England were in employment in 2024 compared with 68% of non-graduates, with

£42,000 as the median nominal salary for graduates against £30,500 for non-graduates (though that is not the full story, as the graduate earnings premium has declined in Britain).

The idea of a university degree becoming an increasing irrelevance to employers is also overstated. According to Felicity Halstead, founder and CEO of GoodWork, a charity helping underrepresented young people (graduates and non-graduates) navigate the job market, degrees are still used as a filtering mechanism among other factors. She recalls a young person speaking with summer interns at a tech company and being frustrated that, despite knowing just as much about computer science as them, all of those interns had degrees, putting the young person without one at a disadvantage.

There is a very real risk of making degrees something only those with family wealth and security are encouraged to pursue. This would discourage young people with educational potential, but without the status or money to insure themselves in the job market, and squeeze them out so that the already privileged have further advantage in winning competitive roles.

Adrian, a friend of mine, didn't have the opportunity to attend university as a teenager because of his background, but knew that he was capable. Without a degree he felt shut out of a range of professional jobs and confined to customer-facing work. Since then, he has attended a Russell Group university as a mature student, graduating with first-class honours, and now works in policy. "Imagine if I internalised the message that 'university isn't for someone like you'? I never would've been able to study, stretch my intellectual capacities and research skills. There are a lot of kids in the same position."

Higher education enables young people to deeply engage with a subject, live independently and get to know themselves better. It would be a mistake to decide that since university is no longer a reliable ladder to employment, it is not worth stepping on to at all. Perhaps it is unfashionable, even irresponsible now, to say that young people should go for personal enrichment. But we also cannot frantically encourage or discourage paths based on short-term labour market forecasts, and a future that is harder and harder to predict.

Jason Okundaye is an assistant Opinion editor at the Guardian

CASE STUDY

Building a Better College-to-Job Pipeline

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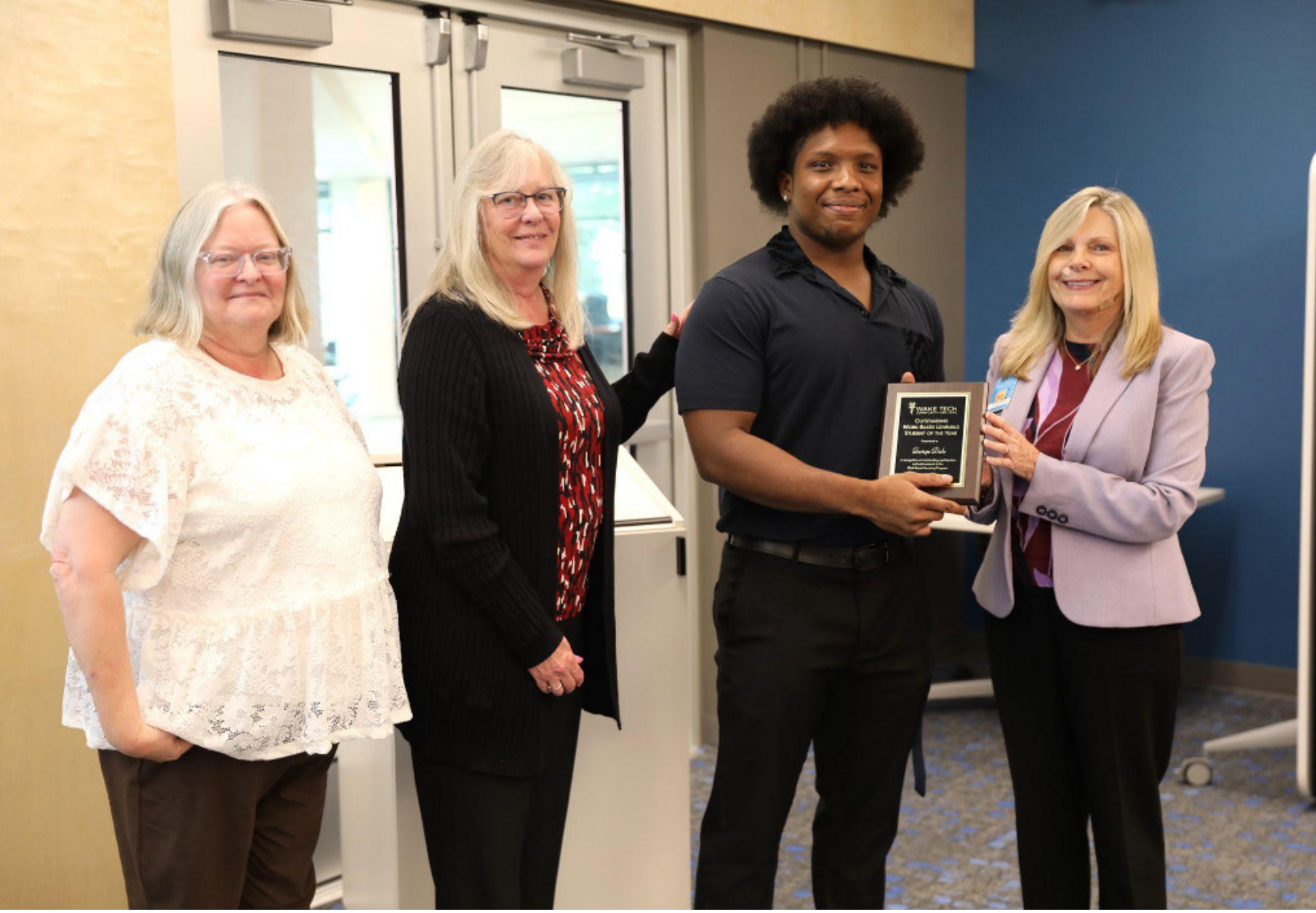

PHOTO COURTESY OF WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

George Dale *(center)* receives Wake Tech's Work-Based Learning Student of the Year award. Dale turned an internship with the American Red Cross into a full-time IT position before graduation, crediting the experience with helping him confirm his career path.

George Dale was helping a blind colleague navigate a remote password reset for the American Red Cross when he realized something important: He could do this work for a living.

The caller needed help logging in to her account for the first time. Dale, an intern from Wake Technical Community College, walked her through accessibility settings, temporary passwords, and keyboard symbols that many computer users take for granted. At one point, he had to explain what a hashtag symbol was without being able to point to a keyboard.

"It felt so rewarding," he says. "That's when I realized this is exactly what I want to do."

Just a few years earlier, Dale wasn't sure where he fit. He enrolled at Campbell University immediately after high school but left after realizing he wanted a more hands-on technical education. He had always been fascinated by computers — building gaming PCs during the pandemic, repairing cracked iPhone screens for friends, tinkering with old devices around the house — but he wanted a clearer pathway into the information-technology field.

At Wake Tech, in North Carolina's Research Triangle, he found one.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

Kathy Frederick, Wake Tech's director of student work experiences and employer/university advisory partnerships, says work-based learning is "the best way to get real-world work experience prior to graduation."

Dale enrolled in the IT Service and Support program and eventually entered the college's work-based-learning initiative, which allows students to earn academic credit while working in positions connected directly to their fields of study.

Through the program, Dale landed an internship with the American Red Cross as a service-desk analyst, balancing college coursework with two jobs and eventually turning the internship into a full-time position before graduation.

"I always tell people now: just do it," Dale says of work-based learning. "There's nothing you lose from getting experience."

Building Work Into College

As colleges face mounting pressure to prove graduates are prepared for the labor market — and as students increasingly question whether traditional degree pathways justify their cost — programs like Wake Tech's are attracting growing attention. Work-based learning, which combines classroom instruction with structured job experience, has become one of higher education's most prominent work-force strategies.

At Wake Tech, the model has gained momentum. Between the fall of 2024 and the spring of 2026, 893 students had participated in work-based-learning experiences through partnerships with 512 employers, according to college data. More than 200 students were hired directly through those experiences.

Through the program, Dale landed an internship with the American Red Cross as a service-desk analyst, balancing college coursework with two jobs and eventually turning the internship into a full-time position before graduation.

For Kathy Frederick, Wake Tech's director of student work experiences and employer/university advisory partnerships, the program's growth reflects a broader shift in what students and employers expect from higher education.

"This is the best way to get real-world work experience prior to graduation," she says.
For community-college students, that link between classroom learning and paid work can be especially important. Many students are balancing jobs, family obligations, and economic pressures while trying to complete degrees.

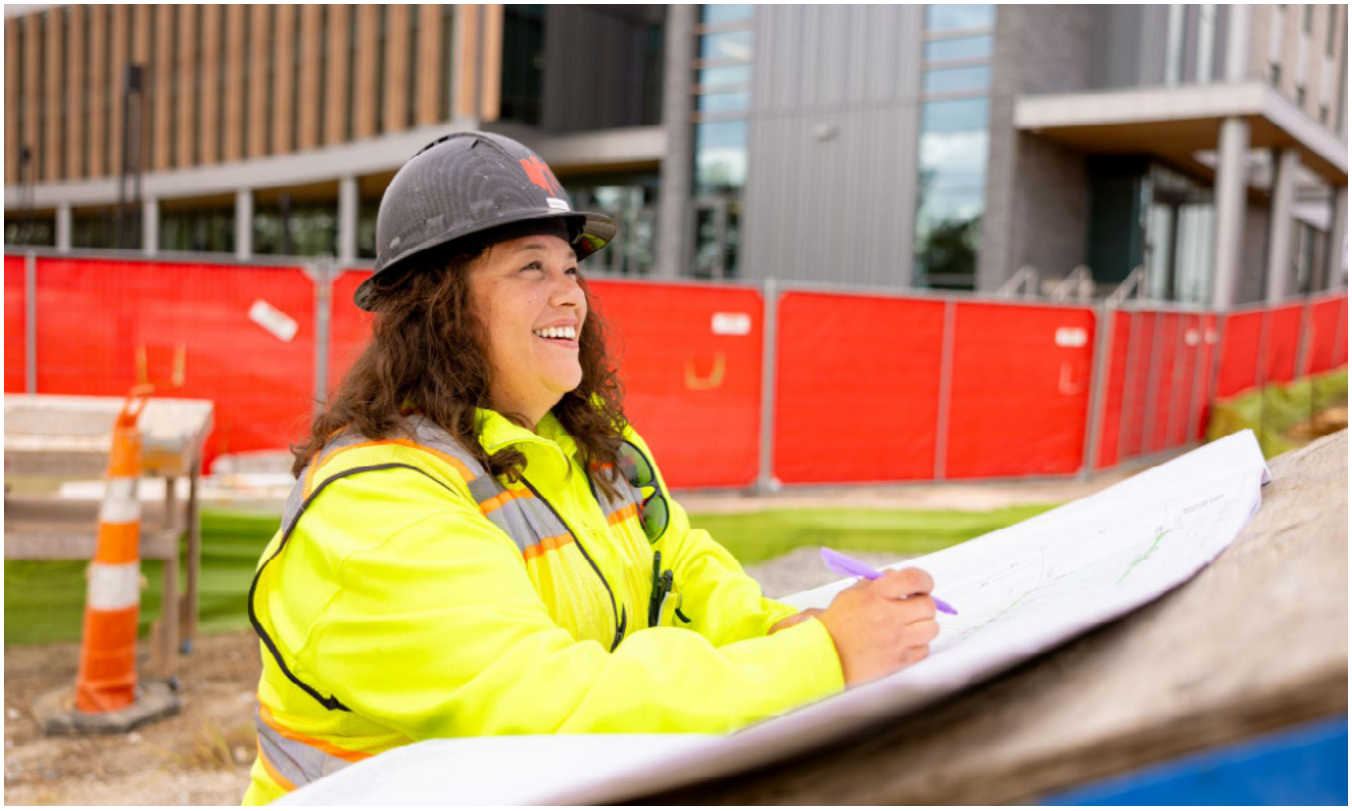

PHOTO COURTESY OF WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

Kimberly Lewis, a former Wake Tech student and the 2024 North Carolina Work-Based Learning Association Outstanding Student of the Year, reviews construction plans at a job site. Lewis completed a work-based-learning placement with Monteith Construction before joining the company full time as an assistant project superintendent.

Historically, internships and cooperative-education opportunities often existed at the margins of higher education, available primarily to students with financial resources or professional connections. Wake Tech's approach attempts to build work experience directly into students' educational pathways. Students can earn one to three hours of academic credit while working in positions aligned with their fields of study. Depending on the program, students may use existing jobs for credit if the work is directly related to their coursework, or they may secure new internships through Wake Tech's employer partnerships and career-services office.

The structure is intentionally hands-on.

Students complete measurable learning objectives with supervisors, submit reflections about professional growth, and receive evaluations from employers throughout the semester. Faculty coordinators stay in regular contact with employers and students to ensure the work experience aligns with academic goals.

"It's going to introduce you to your career field in a way that you're not going to get after you graduate," Frederick says. "It's just the most valuable thing that every student who can take advantage of should take advantage of."

That preparation can include everything from technical skills to workplace communication.

Dale's coursework at Wake Tech prepared him for systems administration, password management, and ticketing platforms similar to the systems he would later use at the American Red Cross. But the internship introduced a different challenge:

helping people under pressure, often from across the country or around the world.

"It taught me the importance of communications, that most of IT is just your customer-service skills," Dale says. "Because you're dealing with different people and helping them and needing to know how to effectively communicate."

At the Red Cross, he fielded calls from locations ranging from Arizona to Sweden. Some callers needed password resets. Others needed access to systems supporting disaster-response operations. The work demanded technical competence, patience, and communication skills that can be difficult to teach in a traditional classroom.

By the spring, Dale says, he had gained enough confidence that he knew he wanted to pursue IT professionally.

His supervisors noticed, too.

After his internship, Dale was invited to stay on as a contractor while completing additional coursework. Shortly before graduation, the Red Cross offered him a full-time position.

"I'm graduating with a full-time job in the field that I want to go into," he says.

Why Employers Keep Coming Back

For employers, that outcome is part of the appeal.

Joel Altman, senior manager of engineering cloud infrastructure services at NetApp, says his company has partnered with Wake Tech since roughly 2010, helping design portions of what is now the college's cloud infrastructure program.

The partnership originally grew from a practical work-force need. NetApp was looking for employees with hands-on experience managing data-center infrastructure, cloud systems, and engineering-lab environments. Wake Tech needed pathways that connected students directly to those careers.

The result was a yearlong co-op structure in which students spend three academic terms working inside NetApp's engineering labs.

"For a long time, we were getting the benefit of what was essentially a yearlong interview process," Altman says.

"For a long time, we were getting the benefit of what was essentially a yearlong interview process," Altman says.

Students begin with foundational tasks such as installing servers, configuring storage arrays, cabling equipment, and decommissioning aging hardware. Over time, they move into more advanced networking and systems-management work.

The arrangement allows employers to evaluate technical ability, teamwork, and long-term fit before making hiring decisions. Altman says about 65 percent of participating students eventually moved into positions within NetApp.

But Altman says one of the most significant outcomes has been something less measurable: diversity.

Historically, he says, hiring pools for technical-infrastructure roles skewed heavily male and lacked demographic variety. Through Wake Tech's work-based-learning partnerships, NetApp saw more women, more career changers, and broader racial and cultural diversity enter the pipeline.

"This has been one of the most successful programs we've seen for truly bringing diversity into the work force," Altman says.

Many students arrive after working in food service, hospitality, retail, or other industries they no longer want to remain in long-term. Others are returning to school later in life to retrain for technical careers.

The work-based-learning structure helps both sides test fit before committing fully.

"It's not just a trial run for us," Altman says. "It's a trial run for them, too."

Some students discover they enjoy systems engineering. Others realize they prefer networking, cybersecurity, or customer support. Occasionally, students conclude the field itself is not for them.

"That's still a success," Altman says. "Because they figured it out before spending years in the wrong career."

That kind of exploration is central to how workforce advocates increasingly think about career preparation.

"Work-based learning is one of the most powerful postsecondary strategies out there," says Michael Collins, senior vice president for the education and training practice at Jobs for the Future, a national work-force-development nonprofit known as JFF.

For years, Collins says, colleges have often treated work experience as something that comes near the end of a student's educational path. JFF sees it differently. "We actually believe that it's a part of a comprehensive career-preparation strategy," he says.

That strategy, Collins says, includes career awareness, exploration, preparation, and work experience. The organization ultimately hopes work-based learning becomes a default component of postsecondary education rather than an optional opportunity students stumble upon by chance.

"We believe that a work-based learning experience should be the default experience for most students," Collins says.

Part of the work-based-learning office's role, Frederick says, is helping students build confidence before they ever arrive at a job site.

One reason, he says, is that work-based learning helps students build connections that coursework alone often cannot provide.

"Work-based learning actually provides that mentorship and professional social capital," Collins says.

Preparing for Work Life

Frederick sees that dynamic play out regularly at Wake Tech.

Students often enter the program nervous about whether they are qualified for professional environments, she says. Many are first-generation college students or adult learners changing careers. Others have never participated in a formal interview process.

Part of the work-based-learning office's role, Frederick says, is helping students build confidence before they ever arrive at a job site. The college works with students on résumés, mock interviews, employer communication, and professional expectations. Faculty coordinators also help students identify placements that align closely with their long-term interests.

"We always tell the students, This is going to affirm your career choice or help you realize that maybe what you thought you were going to be doing is not really what is going to give you the greatest career satisfaction," Frederick says.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

Eight hundred ninety-three Wake Tech students participated in work-based-learning experiences through partnerships with 512 employers between the fall of 2024 and the spring of 2026.

That preparation can be particularly important for community-college students balancing multiple responsibilities.

During his internship, Dale often worked mornings at the Red Cross, afternoons at Lowe's, and weekends completing coursework. At one point, he balanced five classes alongside two jobs.

The schedule was exhausting. But he says the experience gave him something traditional coursework alone could not: certainty.

Without the internship, he says, he likely would have graduated still wondering whether IT was truly the right path. Instead, he leaves Wake Tech with a degree, a full-time job, and a clearer sense of professional identity.

Frederick says the experience gives students a chance before graduation to apply what they have learned in class and test whether the career actually meets their expectations. Work-based-learning advocates argue that confidence matters as much as technical skill.

Collins says advances in artificial intelligence and automation are already reshaping entry-level jobs and forcing employers to rethink talent pipelines. As skill requirements rise, employers increasingly want workers who can contribute immediately.

"If those frontline and entry-level jobs go away, the floor becomes much higher to come into the organization and you need a much higher skill level," he says.

That shift, Collins says, makes it more important for employers to think deliberately about talent development rather than treating work-based learning as a one-off partnership or corporate social-responsibility effort. As entry-level roles shrink, employers will need more intentional pipelines into

their organizations, especially because many now expect new hires to add value quickly.

Still, scaling these programs remains difficult.

Work-based learning requires sustained employer participation, faculty oversight, data tracking, and funding support. Employers must commit time and resources to training students who may or may not remain with the organization. Colleges must coordinate placements, monitor outcomes, and ensure experiences align with academic goals.

Collins says expanding work-based learning will require policy support, funding, stronger infrastructure, better data systems to track outcomes, and incentives that encourage colleges and employers to work together. "I don't want to suggest that it's smooth sailing," he says. "We still need to have incentives in place."

Building a Pipeline, Not Just a Program

At Wake Tech, the scale of employer participation reflects the advantages of operating inside one of the country's most dynamic regional economies. The Research Triangle hosts a dense network of technology companies, health-care systems, nonprofits, and advanced-manufacturing firms that regularly partner with the college.

Work-based learning requires sustained employer participation, faculty oversight, data tracking, and funding support.

But Frederick says the college's approach depends as much on relationships as geography.

The program works because employers are willing to see students not simply as temporary interns, she says, but as future professionals who can grow into long-term employees.

For students like Dale, that opportunity can alter the trajectory of an entire career.

A few years ago, he was uncertain about his academic direction and unsure whether his interest in technology could become a profession. Now he fields IT calls for one of the country's largest nonprofit organizations and graduates already employed in his field. The experience, he says, changed how he thinks about education itself.

"It truly sets you up for life after college," Dale says.

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

COMMENTARY

Colleges Must Deliver A First-Rate Education and Job Readiness Skills

Degrees may give an edge, but career prep is essential.

By Eric J. Gertler | April 10, 2026, at 6:00 a.m.

AARON HAWKINS | GETTY IMAGES

With National College Decision Day looming on May 1, approximately 2.5 million high school students are finalizing their choice for college and worrying, more than ever, about the most consequential financial and personal decision of their young lives.

Those seeking to finance the rising costs of their college education see alarming trends. At the end of 2025, almost 8 million student borrowers had defaulted on $181 billion in federal loans, with another 3 million at least three months behind on payments – the highest ever combined rate of serious delinquency and default.

The Best Colleges Rankings Are Out

More than 1,700 U.S. colleges and universities are ranked, with most participating in the U.S. News statistical survey.

Sarah Wood **Sept. 23, 2025**

They must also contend with the most challenging post-college job market in decades, in which the unemployment rate of recent college grads exceeds the nation's unemployment rate. To land a job, recent grads are submitting hundreds of applications into automated human resources systems without receiving any human responses, even as these same grads seek ways to "AI-proof" their careers.

Simply put, the demand for college-educated workers is in decline, thereby challenging the longstanding wisdom that a college degree provides an essential advantage in job hunting.

As a result, students and parents today are questioning the value and relevance of a college degree – a far cry from 2012 when President Barack Obama called higher education an "economic imperative every family in America should be able to afford."

The college experience has disappointed too many who followed this call to action. Today, more than 40 million Americans have some college education but no degree, leaving them with little benefit even as many remain burdened by student loan obligations.

For these reasons, trust in higher education has fallen in the last decade, from 57% in 2015 to 42% in 2025 (which is up from 36% in 2023).

Abandoning higher education is also not the answer. A college degree still yields considerable economic and non-pecuniary benefits. The college wage premium, though declining, remains substantial – workers with at least a bachelor's degree earn roughly 80% more than those with just high school degrees and, on the downside, experience about half the unemployment rate. College grads also experience better health, lower mortality rates, larger friendship networks and deeper safety nets over their lifetimes.

In the aggregate, these individual benefits provide outsized returns for our overall national strength. College-educated workers contribute disproportionately to innovation, productivity growth, tax revenues and civic participation.

College leaders must work to regain this lost trust in higher education by being part of the solution. They must start by delivering on their promise – ensuring that their students actually graduate with a degree (an important criterion in the U.S. News Best Colleges rankings). Currently, only 61% of college students nationally complete their degree within six years.

Additionally, these higher education leaders can no longer avoid the necessity of preparing students for their post-college careers. They must treat career readiness as a core college obligation, not merely as a supplemental service.

U.S. News Ranks Best Graduate Schools

Find the top-ranked graduate schools in business, education, engineering, law, medicine, nursing and other fields.

Sarah Wood April 7, 2026

Some noteworthy institutions are already rising to the challenge. Brandeis University, for example, has launched an ambitious plan to "reinvent the liberal arts" around integrated career development. Starting in their first semester, every Brandeis student is now paired with a career advisor as well as an academic one; at graduation, each student will receive a "career competency transcript" alongside a traditional grades transcript so prospective employers will understand the skills they have acquired.

Similarly, Arizona State University and other colleges are embedding in-demand skills into coursework, requiring applied learning and rethinking majors to incorporate durable skills such as problem-solving that apply to multiple careers.

Of course, the college experience cannot be reduced solely to job training; rather, it must balance a serious education with a focus on degree completion while cultivating the necessary skills for a demanding and fast-changing post-college labor market.

Parents must simultaneously push college leaders for transparency and accountability. They need to challenge colleges to be more transparent about costs, learning outcomes and job results while also holding them accountable for graduating their students and delivering a first-rate education.

Only in this way will students feel more confident they are making the right decisions for their education and for their future.

Eric J. Gertler is Executive Chairman & CEO of U.S. News & World Report.

Opinion: Is College Worth It? Students need more data, not less, to determine the value of college.

Eric J. Gertler March 23, 2023

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