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## Employers and Public Favor Graduates Who Can Communicate, Survey Finds

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Americans adults and employers want colleges to produce graduates who can think critically and creatively, and can communicate orally and in writing, according to the results of a public-opinion survey released by Northeastern University here on Tuesday.

Respondents were far less interested in having students receive narrow training and industry-specific skills.

In fact, nearly two-thirds of adults and three-quarters of employers agreed with the following statement: "Being well-rounded with a range of abilities is more important than having industry expertise because job-specific skills can be learned at work."

The survey results, which were described in the presentation "Innovation Imperative: Enhancing Higher Education Outcomes," support the conclusions of a poll of employers [<http://chronicle.com/article/Employers-Want-Broadly/138453/>] that the Association of American Colleges and Universities released earlier this year. That poll found broad support for the idea that students should learn to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems, or what the association described as "a 21st-century liberal education."

Many single data points in the survey could be used as evidence of academe's failures—or of its indispensability. But Joseph E. Aoun, Northeastern's president, said people should not seize on individual findings in the service of a tidy narrative.

"Don't focus on only one dimension," he said at a news conference at which the results were released. "Look at the totality of the survey."

### **Contradictory Opinions**

The totality of the results reflected a certain ambivalence.

For instance, while nearly three-quarters said a college degree was more important today than it was for their parents' generation, 62 percent said colleges were doing only a "fair" or "poor" job of preparing graduates for the work force.

Nearly nine respondents in 10 said the American system of higher education needed to change in order to remain competitive with other countries' systems. But the importance of global competition extended only so far: The share of respondents who said students needed more opportunities to gain "global experience" by working or studying abroad (42 percent) was far less than the percentage who favored other experiences, such as internships (79 percent).

The question of who was responsible for preparing future workers also produced a mixed response: Thirty-six percent of respondents said employers do; 35 percent thought it was graduates; and 29 percent answered colleges.

Questions about online learning and massive open online courses, or MOOCs, produced divergent and occasionally contradictory opinions.

Slightly more than half of the respondents believe that MOOCs will fundamentally transform how students are taught, but just 27 percent think the online classes are of the same quality as traditional, in-person education. And yet more than half of the respondents predicted that in five to seven years an online education would be seen as of equal quality to a traditional one.

The ambivalence reflected in the results may suggest a larger sense of disequilibrium in the public, Jeffrey J. Wilcox, corporate vice president for engineering at the Lockheed-Martin Corporation, said at the meeting. "I think what you see in the survey is angst over the pace of change," he said.

The survey, the second that Northeastern has commissioned, which was conducted this year by FTI Consulting. Findings were based on 1,000 telephone interviews of a representative sample of American adults. More than 260 employers were also polled. The margin of error was 3.1 percent.