



COMMISSION ON
HIGHER EDUCATION
& EMPLOYABILITY

Learning for Life and Work

Executive Summary

*from the report of the
Commission on Higher Education & Employability*

Chaired by Gina M. Raimondo, Governor of Rhode Island

NEW ENGLAND BOARD
of HIGHER EDUCATION 

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A Message from Governor Raimondo



There is much that unites us in New England: our rich history, stunning geography, resourceful citizens, innovative businesses, committed policy leaders and a powerful network of postsecondary institutions.

We also share common challenges that are in many ways unique to our region. We welcome dynamic businesses to our region but we are experiencing a shortage of people who are ready and able to fill the jobs these employers require. As soon as 2020, New England states could face a gap as large as 27 percentage points between the share of residents with a postsecondary credential of value,

based on current attainment, and the share of jobs requiring some postsecondary education. Additionally, the number of new high school graduates in New England is projected to decline 14% by 2032. Combined, these forces exacerbate talent pipeline gaps for our growing industries.

In April 2017, when the Commission on Higher Education & Employability set out, I charged it to identify and recommend high-impact practices and institutional and state policies to improve the employability for all postsecondary graduates in New England.

I am pleased to say that we have started this work in Rhode Island, and I know that other New England governors are or are seeking to do the same. In my 2018 State of the State address, I talked about Rhode Island's commitment to change and progress and challenged us to "Let's Keep Going." Through Rhode Island's Promise, we have opened the doors to free community college. We opened the Westerly Higher Education Center to train people for jobs in local communities. And through the 10,000 Small Businesses partnership, Rhode Island is helping small business owners learn the skills they need to thrive in this technology-driven environment.

The Commission on Higher Education & Employability's overarching goal is to increase the career readiness, employability and successful work transitions of graduates, so they can make lifelong contributions to the New England economy and its society. In this report, this goal is supported by targeted recommendations and a strategic and collaborative action plan for higher education, policymakers and business/industry.

The outcome will be that Rhode Islanders, and New Englanders, will gain a readiness that goes beyond their diplomas and will be demonstrated by their ability to transition seamlessly into the workforce, continue to adapt to employers' needs throughout their careers, and support their families.

Our collective challenge is "Let's Keep Going."

Executive Summary

New England is home to 260 colleges and universities and a world-famous concentration of human talent that has provided the fuel needed to generate innovative industries and to enrich civic vitality, advance knowledge and encourage exchange.

Despite the region's strength in postsecondary institutions, however, employers remain concerned about a lack of qualified, skilled workers, especially in technology-intensive and growth-oriented industries.

Surveys of employers, college academic officers and graduates have found that:

- While 96% of chief academic officers at higher education institutions say their institution is very or somewhat effective at preparing students for the world of work, only 11% of business leaders strongly agree that today's college graduates have the skills and competencies that their business needs.¹
- While 64% of students think college graduates are highly prepared to work well in teams, only 37% of employers agree; similarly, while 62% of students think that graduates have adequate oral communications skills, only 28% of employers concur.²

The New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) in April 2017 convened the Commission on Higher Education & Employability, under the leadership of Rhode Island Governor Gina M. Raimondo. The Commission brought together stakeholders from higher education, government, business and other sectors to commit to increasing the work readiness of New England's college graduates for a rapidly changing, increasingly complex economy and society.

Through its work, the Commission sought to ensure a successful, equitable workforce future where education provides not only a well-documented earnings premium, but also meaningful, fulfilling work; where employers see developing talent as a sound investment; and where better-aligned institutions and employers prepare New Englanders for sustained contributions to the well-being of the region.

This report is focused on the collaboration between higher education, regional employers and policymakers. The Commission recognizes that higher education's role in shaping the workforce is one aspect of its much broader mission to develop active thinkers and lifelong learners.

Indeed, definitions of employability should start with a strong foundation of those competencies widely demanded by employers and commonly associated with the liberal arts: communications, critical thinking, empathy and ethical/moral reasoning.

The Commission challenges New England to ensure that all postsecondary graduates are prepared for satisfying careers with living wages, which allow them to contribute to the economic and societal success of the region. To meet this challenge, the Commission believes that all postsecondary students must have access to and demonstrate completion of critical employability-related experiences during their postsecondary education:

1 Gallup and Lumina Foundation, *What America Needs to Know about Higher Education Redesign* (Indianapolis: Lumina Foundation, 2014).

2 Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Washington DC: Author, 2015).

- Foundational skills in literacy, numeracy and communication, including the ability to work in teams, communicate clearly verbally and in writing, and solve problems
- An individual career plan prepared early in their postsecondary experience
- At least one paid and/or credit-bearing work-integrated learning experiences
- Achievement of digital competencies related to their course of study, career goals and the fast changing economy
- Attainment of an affordable credential that is employer-informed and is aligned to career pathways

To meet this goal, the Commission calls on all stakeholders including governors, legislatures, state boards of high education, trustees, faculty and employers to engage with its recommendations. Each state, institution, employer, and individual offers its own unique contributions to the region's economy, culture and success and will bring unique approaches to adopting these recommendations. The Commission understands that addressing the goals embedded in these recommendations will require new investments and alignments of current resources—in a time of challenging state, institutional and organizational budgets.

The Commission has set aggressive Strategic Imperatives for Higher Education & Employability in New England to meet the challenge of increasing the employability of graduates. These imperatives apply equally to public and independent institutions, both two-year and four-year, and recognizes that much of the success of this initiative will come from collaboration among New England's higher education leaders and those in industry and policy.

The Commission has developed a series of recommendations in the key areas of:

- Effective use of labor market data to inform programs, policy and practice
- Re-envisioning advising and career services offered by colleges to better align supply and demand and implement best practices and "disruptive" approaches
- Targeted higher education-industry partnerships
- Increasing postsecondary opportunities for work-integrated, experiential and cooperative learning (for example, internships, field placements), including policy incentives and student aid programs
- In-demand digital skills bundles that include fundamental IT and coding skills, knowledge of the digital economy, data analytics, cloud computing, technology security and entrepreneurship or other essential 21st century skills
- Policies related to new credentials, including the recognition and aggregation of postsecondary and non-postsecondary training and the work experiences of working adults and veterans

While not intended as an implementation guide, the report's recommendations are designed to be actionable with specific steps outlined for key stakeholders—from governors, legislators and state workforce leaders to business and employer executives and hiring personnel, postsecondary leaders, faculty, staff and students.

The Commission believes that by acting now, New England colleges and universities, working with employers and policymakers, can take the lead in driving toward better employability outcomes for individuals, employers and the region.

Recommendations

Strategic Imperatives

1. New England higher education institutions, along with their respective system, coordinating and/or governing boards, should make increased graduate employability a strategic priority—linked to institutions' strategic plans, key outcomes, performance indicators and accountability measures.
2. New England higher education institutions should work to define and embed employability across the institution and in multiple dimensions of learning and the student experience—both curricular and extracurricular.
3. New England should make strategic investments at the state, system and institution level to expand research, assessment and data systems to support understanding and documentation of employability-related outcomes.
4. New England higher education institutions should undertake formal employability audits to assess strategic, educational and assessment-oriented activities—and effectiveness in embedding employability across the institution.
5. New England states should consider specific employability-related equity strategies to support student success—particularly for underrepresented populations that are at risk of not completing postsecondary credentials.

Closing the Employability Gap

The Commission recommends that NEBHE conduct a regular benchmarking of regional equity indicators in order to inform states and where needed, to provide tools and resources that can help states in closing the employability gap.

The recommendations that follow are grouped in six key areas reflecting areas of focus by the Commission.

Effective Use of Labor Market Data and Intelligence

1. Higher education institutions, in partnership with key stakeholders, should develop detailed strategies and action plans for accessing and incorporating actionable labor market data and intelligence into key areas, including: institutional strategy; program offerings, planning, advising and career services; and internship and work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities.
2. Higher education institutions should launch a regional collaborative to increase institutional capacity, resources and networks to effectively implement insights into action plans and into the region's economic development efforts.
3. New England higher education institutions should develop a regional partnership for the shared purchasing and contracting of labor market data, information and intelligence services.

Targeted Higher Education-Industry Partnerships

4. The New England states should collaborate to launch multistate, industry-specific talent pipeline partnerships focused on top growth-oriented sectors in the state and region, (including healthcare, life and biosciences, information technology, advanced manufacturing and financial services) and driven by key stakeholders from higher education, industry and government.
5. New England higher education institutions, employers and policymakers should create sustained structures to better inform key aspects of institutions' work including: academic program design; course content; WIL opportunities; planning, advising and career services; and creating better and more frequent interfaces between the institutions and the changing world of work.
6. New England higher education institutions should work closely with employers and industry partners (including key human resources staff) to better equip students with the ability to understand and articulate the knowledge, skills and competencies they acquire through postsecondary study-enabling them to speak the language of employment and employers.

Planning, Advising and Career Services

7. New England higher education institutions should invest in, and elevate—on campus, and through New England higher education accreditation standards, recognize—advising and career services as key priorities that improve not only graduate employability but also enrollment, retention and completion.
8. New England higher education institutions should better engage each student in clearer goal-setting processes, career-planning engagements and career-related assessments. They should actively expand students' access to: job search and job-getting skills; career management skills; readiness for lifelong learning; and a knowledge of the future of work and skills-preparing them to navigate the changing world of work.
9. The New England states should launch a New England Planning, Advising and Career Services Network—a collaborative community of practice to drive innovation, provide shared services and increase the availability of cutting-edge and best-in-class resources across all types of higher education institutions.

Work-integrated, Cooperative and Internship-based Learning

10. New England states and higher education institutions should work to ensure that all students who enroll in a postsecondary credential program complete at least one high-quality, work-integrated learning experience—including WIL opportunities in key industries important to New England's local and regional economies.

11. In New England, higher education institutions, employers, policymakers and students should collaborate in exploring, developing and implementing policies (public and institutional) that incentivize businesses (through additive investments such as tax credits or other means) to expand paid internships. These policies should also work to retain students and graduates in our states and region.
12. The New England states and higher education institutions should advocate for changes to federal student aid policies to increase funding for work-study and expand opportunities to use these funds for paid internships with qualified employers.

Digital Competencies

13. New England higher education institutions should participate in a strategic Digital Competencies Initiative to expand their capacity for innovative delivery of the digital knowledge, skills and competencies required for graduates' employability in a fast-changing, technology-driven, global economy.
14. New England higher education institutions should collaborate with employer partners to implement digital competency frameworks-supported by technology-enabled curriculum, assessments, and other learning tools to aid students in digital skill acquisition across the whole of their postsecondary experience.
15. New England higher education institutions should lead in incorporating digital competencies as "essential learning outcomes" that are achieved through high-quality postsecondary learning opportunities.

Emerging Credentials and Credentialing System

16. The New England states should collaborate to support the build-out of Credential Engine's Credential Registry. A regional and collaborative approach to this should address high-value credentials that are important to our shared economy and economic needs.
17. The New England states should identify in-demand, high-quality, growth-oriented credentials in sectors that are critical to the innovation, competitiveness and growth prospects for high-wage jobs in multiple New England states. This should include developing pathways linking such credentials to further postsecondary study options and employment opportunities-demonstrating opportunities for mobility between jobs, industries and complementary credentials.
18. Institutions should continue to innovate in developing "out of the box" credentials that respond to the dynamic changing needs of individuals and employers. Further, policymakers and accreditors should support structures, policies and processes that are responsible, innovative, and enable the development of workplace-relevant credentials and certifications, providing incentives, regulatory flexibility, and updated higher education policies informed by employer involvement.



The Commission on Higher Education & Employability, chaired by Governor Gina Raimondo of Rhode Island, is a key initiative of the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). The 50 person Commission represents New England's leaders in education, policy and business who share a commitment to the significance of "employability". New England is the first region to lead such a partnership on employability. The Commission held public meetings and working group sessions from April 2017 to February 2018.

While New England is world-renowned for its high-quality colleges and universities, the region's employers remain concerned about a lack of qualified, skilled workers, particularly in technology-intensive and growth-oriented industries. The challenges of low population growth, persistent equity gaps in postsecondary attainment and increasing global competitiveness require policymakers, business leaders and higher education to collaborate to maximize the region's human capital potential, ensure workforce productivity and improve residents' well-being. While the Commission's origins are regional, it seeks to catalyze a national initiative and assume a broader leadership role in the United States.

The Commission was charged to develop an action agenda, policy recommendations, strategies and next steps to align institutions, policymakers and industry to increase the life and career readiness of college and university graduates—and facilitate their successful transitions to work and sustained contributions to the well-being and competitiveness of their state, region and nation.

More information about the Commission can be found at www.nebhe.org/commission.



NEBHE was founded in 1955, when six visionary New England governors realized that the future of New England's economy depended on the quality and diversity of the region's extraordinary higher education resources, and committed their states to the shared pursuit of academic excellence. Soon thereafter, NEBHE was approved by New England's six state legislatures and authorized by the U.S. Congress.

The Commission on Higher Education & Employability represents NEBHE's ongoing commitment to bringing higher education leaders together with policymakers and representatives from business and industry to collaborate on timely regional issues. Past efforts have focused on distance learning, international competitiveness, and human capital development.

The Commission on Higher Education & Employability is supported by the following partners:



www.nebhe.org/commission