

Career Readiness: An Industry Perspective

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Dr. Michael Flory, Senior Research Scientist

Whereas education systems have several established measures for college readiness, they often struggle with how to measure, or even define, career readiness. So what can we learn from how industry looks at career readiness? CNA Education is conducting a study to document how a high-wage, high-growth industry sector determines the career readiness of recent graduates. This research will provide states with critical information as they review and revise career readiness policies under the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Measures logically should be based on clear definitions, but the complexity of career readiness definitions leads to challenges in establishing comprehensive policies. For instance, industries vary enormously in what they require of recent graduates, across and even within job sectors. And multiple definition categories, depending on the source of the definition, further complicate measuring efforts:

1. **Job-specific skills and training:** Federal labor reports and initiatives, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Talent Pipeline Initiative, attribute job vacancies to gaps in skills and training, suggesting that students need more job-specific skills and training to be ready for careers.
2. **21st-century, employability, or professional skills:** Sources such as Society for Human Resource Management surveys and local industry panels convened for other CNA projects suggest that career readiness is about applied “soft” skills or dispositions, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, enthusiasm, and independence.
3. **Basic requirements:** Some employers set the bar low for new employees, emphasizing only that they must be drug-free and come to work on time. They note that recent drug epidemics and perceived generational culture changes make it difficult to find employees who are even minimally ready for careers.

Given these ambiguities around career readiness definitions, it is no surprise that states are struggling to measure student readiness. Currently, states use a variety of measures, including the WorkKeys exam by ACT, Inc.; the ASVAB exam by the U.S. Department of Defense; state-specific exams, such as the Kentucky Occupational Skills Standards Assessment (KOSSA); and industry certificates—earned through experience or exams—granted by professional organizations.

To inform conversations about career readiness, CNA’s new project will examine how industry leaders measure readiness of new employees. The need for such an inventory was highlighted in recent conversations with state education leaders, who asked, “How do industries measure readiness? Do they look at any of the measures that we use for students at K-12 or postsecondary?” This pilot project will focus on the advanced manufacturing industry sector, which is supported through a large career and technical education (CTE) program at the high school level in Kentucky.

We are conducting:

- Conversations with Kentucky leadership to determine current needs and initiatives in

advanced manufacturing education.

- A literature scan to identify what is already known about measures in the industry sector.
- Interviews with businesses to determine how they define and measure career readiness (or potentially make hiring decisions) for recent graduates.

The results should inform decisions about assessment and curriculum for educators in Kentucky and beyond by bringing industry's perspective to bear on the issue of career readiness.



Dr. Michael Flory is a Senior Research Scientist with expertise in college and career readiness, with a focus on accelerated coursework, career and technical education, and rural settings. Michael joined the Education team in 2009. As an alliance coordinator for REL Appalachia, Michael built researcher-practitioner partnerships and oversaw the research, technical support, and dissemination agenda for the Kentucky College and Career Readiness Alliance. Michael has authored and coauthored over 40 education reports and analytic technical support products, including Appalachia Rising, a systematic review of published data and research from 1995 to 2015 about education in middle Appalachia, The Implementation of Dual Credit Programs in Six Non-Urban Kentucky School Districts, and College and Career Ready Self-Assessment Tool for Virginia Career and Technical Education Programs.

Michael holds a Ph.D. in physical chemistry from the University of Arizona and a B.S. in chemistry education from Purdue University. Michael is also certified as a What Works Clearinghouse Reviewer in Group Design.