SHRM Foundation

Campus to Career Ready:
A Roadmap for Civility and Career Readiness



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The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations

FROM CAMPUS TO CAREER READY

The transition from education to employment is being fundamentally reshaped. Advances in artificial intelligence, shifting workplace expectations, declining social trust, and increasingly diverse and multigenerational workforces have elevated the importance of the human capabilities that enable people to collaborate, communicate, adapt, and exercise sound judgment. While technical skills remain essential, employers are placing growing value on the durable skills that allow individuals to contribute effectively within teams, navigate difference constructively, and continue learning throughout their careers.

No single institution can prepare the workforce of the future on its own. Success increasingly depends on how well higher education, employers, students, and ecosystem partners work together to develop, recognize, and reinforce the capabilities that matter most. Yet, while these stakeholders largely agree on the skills that matter, the systems responsible for preparing, recognizing, and reinforcing them remain poorly aligned. Students often struggle to articulate the durable skills they have developed, educators lack consistent ways to communicate them, and employers struggle to identify and validate those capabilities during hiring and onboarding. The result is not primarily a skills deficit, but a coordination challenge.

The **Roadmap for Civility and Career Readiness** was developed to help address that challenge. It is not intended to prescribe a single solution, but to establish a shared agenda for strengthening the transition from campus to career by improving how durable skills are developed, recognized, communicated, and reinforced across education and workforce systems. Throughout the roadmap, the emphasis is not on creating entirely new programs or redefining workforce readiness, but on helping education, employers, and their partners better align around the capabilities that already matter most for success in work and in life.

The roadmap reflects a multistage process of research and stakeholder engagement. It began with a landscape analysis and consultations with more than twenty leaders representing employers, higher education, philanthropy, and workforce organizations to better understand the opportunities and barriers shaping the campus-to-career transition. Those findings informed the design of the *From Campus to Career Ready* convening, held in Chicago in April 2026, which brought together approximately fifty participants—including students, higher education faculty and administrators, employers and HR professionals, and ecosystem partners—to test, challenge, and expand upon the initial findings. Rather than validating predetermined conclusions, the convening was intentionally designed to surface areas of agreement, expose points of tension, and identify practical opportunities for collective action. This roadmap synthesizes those conversations alongside SHRM Foundation research into a common set of insights, principles, and recommendations.

The result is a roadmap that moves from insight to action. It identifies the structural barriers limiting stronger transitions from campus to career, articulates a shared vision for success, and offers practical actions that educators, employers, students, and ecosystem partners can adapt within their own contexts. Like the systems it seeks to strengthen, it is intended to evolve through implementation, continued learning, and ongoing collaboration.

What and Who This Roadmap Is For

This roadmap is designed for practitioners, leaders, and decision-makers who play a role in preparing young people for the workforce, receiving them, or shaping the conditions in which they start their careers. More specifically, it is intended to be useful to:

- **Higher education faculty, staff, and administrators** who shape student experiences and prepare graduates for careers.
- **Employers, hiring managers, and HR professionals** navigating early-career onboarding and intergenerational workplace dynamics.

- **Ecosystem partners,** nonprofits, workforce development organizations, foundations, and other intermediaries who convene, fund, or otherwise support the education-to-employment effort.
- **Students and young professionals** navigating the transition themselves and must therefore be engaged as agents in shaping what comes next.

Across these audiences, the roadmap is intended to support shared language, clearer signals of readiness, stronger feedback loops, and more intentional pathways between learning and work.

Workplace civility is deteriorating at a measurable pace. SHRM's Civility Index documents more than 207 million acts of incivility in everyday life per day, including 68 million in the workplace (SHRM, 2025). Unfortunately, these incidents have become the defining conditions in which young people are entering the workforce, and in which employers and managers must build productive, functional teams.

The economic toll of workplace incivility is significant, causing U.S. organizations collectively to lose an estimated $2.1 billion each day in productivity and absenteeism, with each act of incivility consuming an average of 36 minutes of productive time (*SHRM*, 2025). Simultaneously, the workforce is in the midst of a generational shift. By 2030, Gen Z will comprise 30% of the U.S. workforce (USDOL). Yet 75% of employers report being unhappy with recent Gen Z hires (Intelligent, 2024), and only 28% of employers believe recent graduates are well-prepared with the durable skills most critical to workplace integration and civility (NACE, 2024; AAC&U, 2024). One in three employees says age or generational differences directly contribute to acts of incivility (SHRM, 2025). The perception gap between young workers and employers is widening, and the cost, measured in lost productivity, early turnover, and broken workplace cultures, has been growing.

This roadmap also responds to a broader set of converging forces defining the modern workplace: the rapid advance of AI and automation, a multigenerational workforce navigating sharply different communication styles and workplace expectations, a national political climate that has made civil dialogue increasingly fragile, and a 25-year decline in societal trust that shapes how people show up with one another in every professional setting. These forces require a response that is deliberate, cross-sector, and grounded in evidence.

> "Incivility is a real challenge, and if we can't get students to truly listen, we can't get them to truly learn. Universities have a role to play in helping students assume good intentions, engage across difference, and develop the judgment to navigate what comes next."
>
> **Michael Murray**
> President and CEO, Arthur Vining Davis Foundations

> "As employers, we need to think about what's going to get people back into the workplace."
>
> **Bob Lemke**
> Principal, NextEra Advisors

DEFINITIONS

This roadmap uses the following definitions throughout, drawn from SHRM Foundation's research:

- **Civility** is the consistent practice of respect, empathy, and active listening that fosters a workplace culture where all individuals feel valued, heard, and able to contribute productively.
- **Durable skills** are foundational, transferable abilities that remain valuable across roles, industries, and over time, regardless of changing technology or job demands.
- **Career readiness** is the demonstrated capacity to enter, contribute to, and grow within a workplace environment alongside the technical knowledge and credentials that secure initial entry.

LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Prior to convening national leaders from higher education, business, workforce development, and campus students, the SHRM Foundation undertook a landscape analysis to better understand the conditions shaping the transition from campus to career. Drawing on research and more than 20 conversations across sectors, the analysis sought to identify where perspectives aligned, where tensions persisted, and where meaningful opportunities existed to strengthen career readiness.

The Campus-to-Career Transition Is Being Rewritten

> "The biggest barrier I see for students is that they're just scared to talk to each other. They're just not used to having conversations with each other."
>
> Higher Education Administrator

The national conversation around workforce readiness has often been simplified to a question of whether graduates possess the technical and durable skills that employers need. Yet, landscape findings pointed toward a more nuanced conclusion. Across sectors, there was remarkably little disagreement about the capabilities that matter most. Communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, empathy, professionalism, and sound judgment consistently emerged as dominant 'civility skills' or 'durable skills' that employers value and educators seek to cultivate. The disconnect lies elsewhere: in the fragmented systems responsible for developing, recognizing, and reinforcing those capabilities, particularly between generations.

Employers frequently describe the durable skills they seek in broad terms while offering few consistent signals about how those skills are demonstrated in practice. Higher education institutions are embedding many of these competencies through coursework, internships, student employment, civic engagement, and co-curricular experiences such as civil discourse and dialogue programs. They often lack a common language to communicate their value to employers, however. Students, in turn, are left navigating expectations that are rarely made explicit to them, often against a backdrop of generational power imbalances, unshared norms, and language and expectation differences. The result is less a skills deficit than a coordination challenge characterized by inconsistent signaling, weak feedback loops, and limited opportunities for employers and educators to align around shared expectations. Rather than asking how institutions can create entirely new skills, stakeholders instead asked how existing strengths might be made more visible, practiced more intentionally, and recognized more consistently across the transition from education to employment.

What the Strongest Models Have in Common

Across interviews, one pattern surfaced with unusual consistency. The most promising campus initiatives did not treat career readiness, dialogue, or durable skills as separate programs layered onto the student experience. Instead, they embedded them into the architecture of learning itself. Whether through first-year experiences, student employment, experiential learning, internships, capstone projects, civic dialogue, or leadership opportunities, the strongest institutions created repeated opportunities for students to practice communication, receive feedback, navigate disagreement, and develop professional judgment in authentic settings. Another emerging trend has been recognizing 'intergenerational readiness' as its own core durable skill, with civil discourse programs inconsistently addressing it through their content and approach.

Stakeholders also challenged the assumption that technological change diminishes the importance of these human capabilities. If anything, advances in artificial intelligence and automation make them more valuable. As routine tasks become easier to automate, the qualities that distinguish successful employees increasingly center on interpretation, collaboration, ethical judgment, adaptability, and the

ability to work productively across difference. Several interviewees described 'bridgebuilding' and 'intergenerational readiness' not as a civic exercise alone, but as a workplace competency essential to leadership in increasingly diverse and complex organizations.

> "Bridgebuilding is not separate from career readiness, it is how people function in complex environments where there isn't a clear right answer.
>
> "When we move into a world where information is abundant, the differentiator becomes how people engage, interpret, and work across difference."
>
> Interfaith America

Landscape findings also reinforced that responsibility for career readiness does not rest with any single sector. Higher education prepares students, but employers shape their earliest experiences of work through onboarding, feedback, supervision, and organizational culture.

Ecosystem partners provide the connective tissue that helps institutions learn from one another, establish shared language, and scale effective practice. Students themselves remain active as participants whose growth depends on opportunities to practice, reflect, and receive meaningful feedback.

How to Use This Roadmap

This roadmap is best understood as a living framework rather than a fixed prescription. It is designed to evolve through implementation, pilot programs, ongoing engagement, and structured feedback from the sectors it serves.

Where possible, it includes pilot ideas, and examples of exiting leading practice that can be adapted across contexts and institution types.

THE PROBLEM WE'RE SOLVING

The following top structural issues faced collectively by stakeholders create current conditions in which well-intentioned students, educators, and employers are all working toward workforce readiness without a reliable way to communicate with one another.

A Coordination and Opportunity Gap, Not a Skills Deficit

The dominant narrative about young people and workplace readiness is that there is a skills gap: that graduates are entering the workforce missing crucial capabilities, which higher education is failing to provide. However, among stakeholders there is alignment that this is an oversimplification at best, and inaccurate at worst.

Instead if a gap in skills, the primary issue is a coordination gap: a breakdown in the signals, feedback loops, rule sharing, and language commonality that would allow students, educators, and employers to align preparation, competency, recognition, and validation.

> "There's a wider pool of young talent that we're leaving untapped because our systems just aren't set up for them."
>
> **Nakia Mack**
> Senior Fellow, Postsecondary Workforce Pathways
> College Board

What looks like a skills deficit is often an opportunity gap for students who have not had structured occasions to practice, fail, and develop judgment in low-stakes settings. Alternatively, it is a signaling gap for employers who struggle to articulate what they are seeking, and educators who have built capabilities into their curricula that employers do not recognize because neither side uses the same language.

Trust Deficit as the Root Condition

Across stakeholders, and referenced in earlier data, is a pervasive erosion of trust. Students do not trust that employers will support them if they fail. Employers do not trust that graduates have been adequately prepared and will bring sufficient skills to the workplace. Institutions are navigating declining public confidence in their value and translational definitions for skills developed in academic contexts. Across the board, people are operating under the conditions of a multi-decade decline in social trust that shapes how people interact with one another in every professional setting.

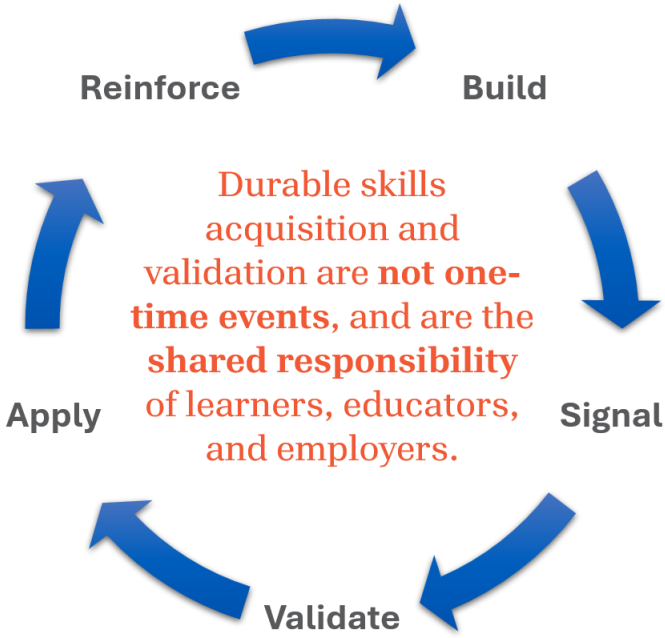
> "The companion to trust is compassion and grace."
>
> **Andrew Hibel**
> COO and Co-Founder, HigherEdJobs

Participants pointed to mistrust as a common thread across different forms of incivility. Whether in classrooms, workplaces, or civic spaces, individuals are less likely to engage constructively when they assume others are acting in bad faith or dismissive of their concerns. Building trust – or at minimum reducing mistrust – emerged as a foundational condition for productive dialogue, collaboration, and learning.

Stakeholders entered the convening with different assumptions about the purpose and outcomes of civility, dialogue, and discourse-based campus programming. For some, these experiences were primarily about preparing students to engage across differences and participate constructively in civic life. Others viewed them through a workforce lens, emphasizing their role in development communication, conflict resolution, and other durable skills that allow workers to contribute across lines of difference with peers in the workplace.

Participants ultimately agreed that dialogue and discourse experiences help students build many of the capabilities that employers increasingly value, like active listening, self-awareness, and engaging in disagreement productively. These experiences can strengthen workplace readiness for increasingly diverse, intergenerational, and fast-changing workplaces where effective communication can combat incivility.

At the same time, stakeholders cautioned against overstating what these programs can accomplish. Dialogue and civility initiatives cannot compensate for poor management, unclear workplace expectations, toxic organizational cultures, or a lack of development support once employees enter the workforce.



Broken Feedback Loops

There is a failure of feedback at nearly every stage of the system that impedes coordination and correction. Students often receive infrequent, vague, or delayed performance feedback through performance cycles of several months to a year for formal review. Higher education rarely has a clear and consistent connection to employers to understand what skills graduates are missing, and students often lack the context to understand what professional norms they are navigating until they have already violated them.

Participants identified these challenges as a structural issue that organizations can and

should address - for example, it's uncivil to make people wait 6 months or a year for a performance review.

Creating cultures of timely, developmental feedback, especially for early-career employees, is not just a management best practice; it is the mechanism by which durable skills are built and defined for the workplace.

> "Young people are so heavily watched. The first thing you want to do is shrink back."
>
> **Zoë Jenkins**
> Director of Civic Trust and Leadership, Civics Unplugged

WHAT STAKEHOLDERS SAID

College Students

- ***Expectations and support are mismatched.*** Students entering the workforce often find themselves navigating norms that are never made explicit. They may have developed interpersonal and collaborative capabilities in college, but lack the language to describe those capabilities in professional contexts or to older generations, or the orientation to translate behaviors developed on campus into workplace expectations. The mismatch is compounded when employers provide feedback that is misunderstood or received as vague, and when workplaces offer little structured support for the adjustment period.

  > "We show up and expect to be told what to do, because there is too much structure and not enough space to figure out who we are."
  >
  > **Eliza Rhodes**
  > Student, University of Utah

  Students noted that the expectations gap cuts both ways: young workers are sometimes faulted for not meeting standards, working within rules, or knowing social mores they were never shown. They often feel they are being evaluated against invisible criteria they do not understand.

- ***Surveillance culture conditions young people to shrink rather than take risks.*** Students described a formative experience defined by observation and documented performance, from standardized testing to social media to algorithmic platforms. This "surveillance culture," as one participant named it, has conditioned many of their peers to minimize risk, avoid visibility, and conform rather than experiment. When they arrive in workplaces that expect initiative, independent judgment, and proactive communication, they are being asked to operate in a mode that their prior environments actively penalized.

  > "We need to provide an opportunity to fail – not just at the task of the job, but at what it looks like to fail civilly. How do we champion failure?"
  >
  > **Kara Dillard**
  > Executive Director, Madison Center for Civic Engagement, James Madaison University

  Several student participants connected this dynamic directly to the trust deficit: it is difficult to take an interpersonal risk with a colleague or manager when your entire educational experience has taught you that mistakes are recorded, not recovered from.

- ***Students need room to fail.*** Students expressed they need structured opportunities to fail safely. The most effective durable skills development in their experience came from mission-driven activities, real team projects, and high-stakes-but-supportive environments, but the majority of instruction came from passive instruction.

  The challenge, as several student participants framed it, is also about self-knowledge. Young people arrive in workplaces with too little practice in self-discovery that enables them to understand and work to their own strengths.

Higher Education (Faculty, Staff, Administrators)

- ***Employer expectations shift fast with little signal about what's needed.*** Faculty and administrators face a persistent challenge: they are preparing students for a labor market where expectations change faster than curriculum cycles can accommodate, and employers signal their needs inconsistently and often at a high level of abstraction. "We want employees with emotional intelligence" and "we want team players" are things many employers say. What those phrases mean in practice is rarely communicated, leaving educators preparing their students for a target they cannot see.

  Closing the gap between higher education and employers requires shared language and deliberate feedback mechanisms, neither of which currently exists at scale. As one higher education participant noted, there is an imperative for higher ed to make those types of things (the skills students are developing, the contexts where they are expected to apply them, and employer expectations) explicit — not just about what happens after a student leaves.

- ***The skills are embedded in the core curriculum, but are not recognized adequately.*** Many institutions are already building the capabilities that employers say they need through experiential learning, capstone projects, and liberal arts curricula that cultivate dialogue, critical thinking, and collaboration. However, neither students nor their future employers have a consistent way to name, recognize, or validate those experiences into measurable or hirable skills for early career employees.

  Students are already developing many of these capabilities on and off campus. The imperative is to help students name those skills, help institutions signal them, and help employers recognize them.

- ***Skill development needs to be an unavoidable part of a degree.*** Higher education participants converged on a principle that cuts against the model of elective skill-building: the development of durable skills and civil dialogue capacities needs to be built into the fabric of a degree, not offered as supplemental programming that some students engage with and others skip.

Employers and HR

- ***The real need is interpersonal readiness, not just task completion.*** Employer participants consistently expressed that technical competence is necessary but insufficient. Their most pressing challenge is not hiring people who can do the job but instead bringing in people who can navigate the relationships, expectations, and dynamics of a workplace. Early-career employees who struggle are rarely struggling because of a gap in hard skills, but because they avoid difficult conversations, don't know how to give or receive feedback, or struggle to adapt when expectations are ambiguous.

  The framing that resonated across employer participants was "career readiness" as a holistic concept encompassing not just what a person can do, but whether they can function in a team, manage conflict constructively, and build relationships across difference in a workplace context. Behavioral interviewing, including asking candidates to describe specific past situations, was

cited as one of the more reliable tools employers have, but the underlying challenge of measuring these qualities at scale remains unsolved.

- ***Feedback comes too late and too infrequently to help early-career employees grow.*** Employers acknowledged that their own practices often contribute to the readiness gap they describe. Annual or semi-annual reviews create long lags between behavior and consequence, with little opportunity for adjustment. New employees may navigate performance expectations without adequate guidance, then receive feedback about a seeming pattern of behavior that could have been addressed at the first instance. Participants recognized this as a structural problem that organizations have the power to address.

> "What are the core skills that translate across sectors? How do we measure education and the credential itself?"
>
> **Matt Young**
> Senior Brand Manager, Procter & Gamble

Ecosystem Partners

- ***The "skills gap" framing is wrong, it's a coordination and opportunity gap.*** Young people do not lack skills, but instead lack adequate pathways to develop, demonstrate, and credential those skills in ways that are legible to employers.

  Many students have developed and demonstrated relevant durable skills, but need help articulating and claiming them in a recruiting context. For example, training in and experience leading constructive dialogue programs can be framed in the context of cross-functional collaboration. This shift in interpretation has significant implications for how solutions are designed. The interventions that matter most are about connecting actors and aligning incentives instead of building more programs. One participant noted that higher ed has been having the discussion of the skills gap, but getting employers to the table is hard; the real job is getting people to the table.

- ***Credentialing outside traditional college pathways is urgent and unsolved.*** Multiple ecosystem partner participants named credentialing as the unresolved thread running through the day's discussions. For young people who do not follow traditional four-year college pathways, the question of how to validate durable skills and communicate their value to employers remains largely unanswered.

  Even within traditional education, micro-credentialing and skills-based validation are promising tools. Some described an existing micro-credentialing framework that breaks down competencies like critical thinking into specific, assessable sub-skills, with 1,400 groups worldwide using it.

- ***Ecosystem partners are uniquely positioned t o connect sectors that don't talk to each other.*** One of the clearest roles for ecosystem partners is as conveners across institutional silos. Higher education and employers share aspirations but lack formal structures for sustained dialogue. Ecosystem partners can serve as the connector between them, building the shared language and aligned incentives to develop over time.

  They can also surface gaps and opportunities across the broader ecosystem. Because they operate across institutions and sectors, they are positioned to spot emerging trends, elevate

> "We need to figure out how to build the bridge from upskilling to something that employers validate."
>
> **Michelle Sobel**
> President, Unify America

promising practices, and help stakeholders learn from one another rather than reinventing solutions in isolation. They can also create conditions for experimentation by supporting localized pilots, testing new approaches to durable skill validation and signaling, and scaling successful models across contexts.

A SHARED VISION

What does a world where civility and career readiness are meaningfully integrated look and feel like?

What Success Looks Like Across Sectors

A successful outcome of this roadmap is not a world without workplace tension or intergenerational friction, it is a world with the conditions to navigate that tension productively. In this vision, durable skills are not optional, remedial, or separate from academic and workplace success. They are embedded into the campus to career pathway and practiced at every stage.

Across stakeholder groups, the convening surfaced a set of shared aspirations that can serve as orienting markers:

- Students are already practicing communication, collaboration, adaptability, and intergenerational dynamics on campus through academic, civic, co-curricular and employment experiences.
- Students arrive in the workforce with both the skills and the self-knowledge to navigate workplace culture, and employers are prepared to receive and support them in that transition.
- Employers, higher education institutions, and ecosystem partners share a working vocabulary around durable skills, civility, and career readiness robust enough to align curricula, hiring practices, and development programs.
- Feedback flows regularly, honestly, and constructively across every level of the system: from campuses to employers, from managers to new employees, and from employers back upstream to educators.
- Young workers have had structured, low-stakes opportunities to practice, fail, and develop judgment before they need to perform under real conditions.
- The workplace is a site of growth and belonging, not just productivity, and organizations actively build cultures where civil engagement is modeled, expected, and supported.

Taking Action in Practice

The vision of this roadmap becomes visible through observable behaviors and institutional conditions. In practice, it could look like:

- A first-year student completing a required course that integrates dialogue and civic engagement skills, then being supported to articulate those experiences in career language for an internship application.
- A manager providing specific, timely feedback to a new employee on a particular communication pattern and following up two weeks later to acknowledge growth.
- A faculty member designing a capstone project that requires students to work through a real disagreement across difference and then reflect on what they learned about themselves and their communication style.
- An HR professional redesigning an onboarding program to include structured practice of difficult workplace conversations, rather than assuming new hires already know how to navigate them.
- An ecosystem partner facilitating a joint working session between a community college and a regional employer to develop shared language around what “professional readiness” means in that specific industry.

Core Principles to Anchor Progress

The following principles can guide implementation and serve as evaluative criteria for the roadmap's success:

- **Cross-sector responsibility.** No single sector owns the problem or the solution. Students, educators, employers, and ecosystem partners all have roles, and the roadmap calls for accountability at every level.
- **Trust is foundational.** The behavioral and cultural changes this roadmap calls for are only possible within conditions of trust and psychological safety.
- **Failure for growth.** The development of judgment, resilience, and durable skills requires structured opportunities to fail and recover. These must be built into educational and early-career experiences.
- **Equity of access.** The skills and opportunities described in this roadmap cannot be reserved for students on traditional pathways or at well-resourced institutions.
- **Embedded, practiced, and applied.** Durable skills are most effectively developed when they are embedded through educational and workplace experiences, practiced repeatedly through feedback and reflection, and applied in authentic, real-world settings.
- **Living implementation.** This roadmap is designed to evolve through pilots, feedback, and sustained engagement with the communities it serves and should continue to be adapted to the changing environment.

PRIORITY ACTION AREAS

1. Building Shared Language and Signaling Between Higher Ed and Employers

The absence of shared language is one of the most concrete and addressable structural barriers identified across all stakeholder groups. This action area calls for deliberate investment in the structures and processes that create shared language as an ongoing, relationship-based practice between institutions and employers.

Starting points:

- Equip employers to explicitly define durable skills through observable behaviors and examples, rather than broad concepts.
- Co-author shared competency frameworks that can guide both curriculum design and hiring rubrics, reducing the translation gap between education and employment.
- Pilot employer-in-residence and alumni translator programs in which professionals name the specific behaviors that distinguish strong early-career employees and communicate those directly to students and faculty.
- Create dedicated feedback channels through which employers provide regular, specific input to partner institutions about graduate preparation, replacing anecdotes with structured data.

2. Designing Structured Opportunities for Failure and Feedback

The need for structured, low-stakes opportunities to practice and fail is critical. Young people develop resilience, judgment, or interpersonal skills through experience, reflection, and timely feedback. The roadmap calls for a deliberate shift from programming that teaches skills abstractly to environments that create conditions for skills to be practiced, tested, and refined.

Starting points:

- Design required capstone or experiential courses that simulate workplace communication and conflict in low-stakes settings.
- Train managers and supervisors in timely, developmentally focused feedback practices, with a particular emphasis on tools for early-career employees in their first 90 days.
- Redesign internship programs around explicit skill development milestones, with structured check-ins and debrief sessions.

> "Employers don't have the time to parse through everyone's background and language – they're focused on what someone can actually do."
>
> **Rob Lee**
> Chief Growth Officer, Constructive Dialogue Institute

3. Strengthening Trust Across Stakeholder Relationships

Trust is not only an outcome and an input of good working relationships. The conditions for productive learning and civil engagement are only possible when people feel safe enough to take relational risks.

Starting points:

- Develop manager and supervisor training focused on psychological safety practices including the specific behaviors that communicate to new employees that they are safe to speak up, disagree, and ask for help.
- Recognize trust-building practices as legitimate components of professional development and organizational culture.
- Establish peer mentorship programs that match early-career employees with mid-career colleagues across generational lines, creating relationship-based feedback pathways.

4. Credentialing and Validating Durable Skills in Meaningful Ways

Credentials matter because they create legible signals in a world where employers are making high-volume decisions with limited information - the roadmap calls for accelerated work on how durable skills can be communicated in ways that employers will recognize and value.

Starting points:

- Pilot micro-credentialing programs in partnership with regional employer coalitions, tied to observable and assessable durable skills competencies.
- Create employer pledge programs in which companies publicly commit to recognizing specific durable skills credentials in hiring and advancement decisions.
- Pursue research partnerships with assessment organizations to develop validated, scalable tools for measuring durable skills development across educational contexts.

"As we think about credentialing, it's important to pay attention to what's happening outside of skills - a student who facilitates dialogues or has been a peer educator, for example, brings something that doesn't show up on a credential."

Jaya Dayal
Learning and Development Manager, BridgeUSA

5. Preparing Workplaces, Not Just Students, for the Transition

Students are not the only ones needing to become more workplace ready. Workplaces also need to be prepared to develop and retain early-career talent. This means rethinking onboarding, feedback structures, hierarchy, and the cultural signals organizations send to people who are new and navigating a new organization. Employers play a critical role in creating environments where emerging talent can continue durable skill development through feedback, coaching, and development support once they are on the job.

Starting points:

- Redesign onboarding programs to explicitly address workplace culture, communication norms, and feedback expectations.
- Create civil dialogue and intergenerational communication training for managers and team leads focused on the conditions for honest, productive conversations across seniority and generational lines.
- Conduct organizational assessments that evaluate the maturity of efforts to support early-career employees in speaking up, making mistakes, and asking questions.

6. Expanding Access

Career readiness must be made accessible to all learners by improving pathways to high-quality work-based or work-aligned learning such as internships, experiential learning, mentorship, and development opportunities that build durable skills most effectively.

Starting points:

- Fund paid internship programs and subsidized experience opportunities for students at community colleges and under-resourced institutions.
- Expand employer diversity commitments beyond traditional recruiting pipelines to include talent from a wider range of educational backgrounds and geographies.
- Invest in research on which durable skills development interventions are most effective across different socioeconomic and institutional contexts and share findings publicly.

“Employees, especially in early career, stay at jobs because they need the benefits. The question is are we giving them a reason to stay beyond that."

Brooke Chlapecka
Associate Producer, Ulta Beauty

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES BY SECTOR

STUDENTS

Students are active participants who have both the agency and responsibility to shape their own preparation and to advocate for the conditions that allow them to develop. They can and should:

- Seek out experiential and high-impact learning opportunities early, including internships, research projects, community-engaged coursework, and peer mentorship.
- Practice naming and articulating durable skills developed through extracurricular, civic, and community experiences, not only academic coursework, so that those experiences become translatable in professional contexts.
- Engage honestly with feedback, even when it is uncomfortable, and ask for clarity when feedback is too vague to act on.

ECOSYSTEM PARTNERS

Ecosystem partners have a unique role in enabling the coordination this roadmap calls for. They sit outside the primary institutional relationships and can serve as conveners, translators, and accountability holders. They could:

- Convene cross-sector working groups that bring employers and higher education into sustained dialogue around shared language, expectations, and aligned practice.
- Fund and facilitate pilot programs that test durable skills credentialing, structured failure-and-feedback opportunities, and mentorship.
- Advocate for policy and funding environments that support paid internships, micro-credentialing innovation, and other equity-oriented components of the roadmap.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Faculty are often the closest to students in the developmental process, but least connected to employer expectations. Faculty can:

- Make durable skills development an explicit learning outcome in course syllabi.
- Design assessments that require the demonstration of interpersonal and collaborative skills.
- Create structured opportunities for productive disagreement, dialogue across differences, and reflective feedback within course activities.

Campus administrators set the structural and cultural conditions within which faculty and students operate. Higher ed administrators are positioned to:

- Require evidence of durable skills development as part of graduation milestones.
- Invest in faculty development focused on durable skills pedagogy, including how to build dialogue and reflection into all courses.
- Create institutional language and recognition systems that name and validate durable skills development for students, including on transcripts and in formal communications.

EMPLOYERS

Employers have a core role and responsibility to create environments where emerging talent can practice civility skills, receive developmental feedback, and navigate workplace dynamics with support. Leadership within organizations can and should:

- Redesign onboarding to explicitly communicate workplace culture, norms, and expectations, rather than assuming new hires will infer them through observation. Articulate the specific behaviors, expectations, and competencies that matter in practice.
- Commit to regular, structured feedback cycles for early career employees where durable skills gaps are presumed to exist.
- Recognize and value durable skills credentials in hiring and promotion decisions, sending a clear market signal that these competencies matter.
- Focus on competency building among existing staff, including on intergenerational differences, clear and strategic communication, and civil dialogue.
- Encourage retention and training over quick removal or replacement.

Where Cross-Sector Collaboration Is Essential

Several of this roadmap's priority action areas cannot be addressed by any single sector acting alone. The following require deliberate cross-sector design and shared accountability:

- **Shared language development and durable skill translation** require employers, higher education, and ecosystem partners to work together over sustained time to build and test common definitions of workforce readiness. This collaboration should also help students identify, frame, and communicate the durable skills they develop through coursework, dialogue, leadership, and co-curricular experiences in language that employers recognize and value during hiring.
- **Credentialing and validation** requires employers to commit to recognizing credentials that higher education and ecosystem partners develop, which is only possible through sustained relationships and mutual trust.
- **Feedback loop repair** requires higher education to hear from employers regularly and specifically, and requires employers to invest time in signaling their expectations upstream.
- **Trust-building across the student-employer-institution triangle** requires all three to engage as genuine partners rather than actors with separate interests and separate accountability structures.
- **Durable skill development and career readiness** sit between systems. Progress depends on stakeholders moving beyond parallel efforts and towards shared responsibility, shared language, and sustained collaboration.

Throughout this process, one finding emerged repeatedly: **Stakeholders often agreed on the destination while disagreeing on the starting point and steps to get to that destination.**

Participants **shared** a commitment to stronger communication, healthier workplaces, successful transitions into employment, and better collaboration across difference.

What they **didn't share** were common definitions of civility, readiness, workplace incivility; an understanding of what validation would instill trust across the system; and agreement on who needed to do what in addressing and shifting the barriers affecting that end goal.

The convening helped create greater clarity around those distinctions. It surfaced where stakeholder assumptions diverged, where goals overlapped, and where opportunities exist to build stronger alignment between educational experiences and workplace expectations.

CONCLUSION

In 2026, educators, employers, students, philanthropy, and workforce partners converged around a shared question: how do we prepare emerging talent not just to enter the workforce, but to contribute and thrive within it? Despite varied definitions of civility, readiness, workplace success, and the role of higher ed, the conversation revealed important areas of alignment. Stakeholders shared a belief that durable skills matter, that relationships and trust are foundational to healthy workplaces, and that stronger connections between education and employment are needed to support the next generation of talent.

Participants wrestled with what civility, dialogue, and discourse-based programming can realistically accomplish throughout the convening. The discussion clarified that while these experiences can strengthen durable skills, they cannot substitute for organizational support. Preparing students and preparing workplaces are complementary responsibilities. Participants also highlighted the growing importance of intergenerational communication as a durable, especially as employees are more often navigating generational differences in the workplace.

The challenge is not a lack of durable skills among students; across campuses, students are already developing these skills. The problem is that those skills too often go unrecognized and unvalidated. The opportunity ahead is to better recognize, validate, and connect those experiences to workforce expectations. That will require stronger alignment across sectors, clearer signals of readiness, and more intentional pathways that help individuals carry these skills from campus to the workplace.

This roadmap is a starting point, not a final answer. The work ahead is to continue building shared language, stronger partnerships, and practical strategies that help institutions and employers reinforce the skills that matter most. No single approach emerged as the definitive solution, so continued experimentation, learning, and cross-sector collaboration will be essential. If successful, the result will be more than improved career readiness. It will be stronger pathways between education and employment, workplaces better equipped for collaboration, adaptability, and trust, and a generation of emerging talent prepared to succeed at work, but to help shape healthier organizations, stronger communities, and a more connected society.

For questions or to learn more about the SHRM Foundation, contact: Clayton Lord | clayton.lord@shrm.org

CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to the following contributors:

Sumreen Ahmad
Managing Director, Talent & Organization
Accenture

Kia Afcari
Director, Greater Good Workplaces
The Greater Good Science Center

Nick Beadle
CEO and Founder
Jobs That Work

Parth Bhansali
Area Sales Manager
Dav El | BostonCoach

Ashley Biser
Co-Director, Arneson Institute for Practical Politics and Public Affairs
Ohio Wesleyan University

Bridget Burns
Founding CEO
University Innovation Alliance

Carly Chase
Vice President and General Manager of Careers
U.S. News & World Report

Brooke Chlapecka
Associate Producer
Ulta Beauty

John Churchill
Vice President of Grants and Programs
Arthur Vining Davis Foundations (AVDF)

Jaya Dayal
Learning and Development Manager
BridgeUSA

Kathleen DeLaski
Founder and Board Chair
Education Design Lab

Kara Dillard
Executive Director, Madison Center for Civic Engagement
James Madison University

Jen Domagal-Goldman
Executive Director
ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge

David Dulio
Director, Center for Civic Engagement, Department of Political Science
Oakland University

Alex Edgar
Youth Engagement Manager
Made By Us

Matt Farley
Senior Vice President
Campus Compact

Ashley Finley
VP for Research and Senior Advisor to the President
American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

Diana Fischer
Senior Director, Workday Foundation
Workday

Andrew Hibel
COO and Co-Founder
HigherEdJobs

Dr. Darrin Hicks
Professor of Communication Studies; Director of Debate; Affiliate Faculty in Conflict Resolution
University of Denver

Angela Jackson
Founder; Lecturer
Future Forward Institute / Harvard University

Markita Jeter
Associate Specialist
SHRM Foundation

Zoë Jenkins
Director of Civic Trust and Leadership
Civics Unplugged

Chad Johns
Chaplain
Ohio Wesleyan University

Megan Johnson
Senior Director of Corporate Strategy
Interfaith America

Nicole Koblesky
Vice President, HR and Administration
Rock River Valley Blood Center

Paul Lambert
Religion Initiative Director, Wheatley Institute
Brigham Young University

Rob Lee
Chief Growth Officer
Constructive Dialogue Institute

Doug Lederman
Principal
Lederman Advisory Services

Bob Lemke
Principal
NextEra Advisors

Clayton Lord
Senior Director
SHRM Foundation

Susannah Loss
Senior Associate
High Lantern Group

Taylor Maag
Director of Workforce Policy
Jobs for the Future (JFF)

Nakia Mack
Senior Fellow, Postsecondary Workforce Pathways
College Board

Blake Maroney
Project Manager
Midway Restoration

Leigh Mascolino
Director of Career Connection
Ohio Wesleyan University

Maria Mendoza-Pepin
Vice President, Human Resources
National Able Network

Cassie Meyer
Director of Campus Partnerships
Interfaith America

Chelsea Miller
Associate Director, UpSkill America
The Aspen Institute

Michael Murray
President and CEO
Arthur Vining Davis Foundations (AVDF)

Sara Rahim
Manager
SHRM Foundation

Cristian Reyes
Senior Student Engagement Associate
Today's Students Coalition

Katy Schneider Riddick
Director
High Lantern Group

Charles Rhodes
Student
Brigham Young University

Eliza Rhodes
Student
University of Utah

Nate Schult
Senior Program Officer
Arthur Vining Davis Foundations (AVDF)

Francesca Schuler
Executive Director
Dialogue Vanderbilt, Vanderbilt University

Mohamed Sheikh
Student
Bowie State University

Sabrina Sheikh
Senior Program Manager
Institute for Educational Leadership

Melissa Shew
Associate Director of Teaching Excellence
Marquette University

Michelle Sobel
President
Unify America

Matt Young
Senior Brand Manager
Procter & Gamble

Megan Zwart
Provost and Vice President
Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, IN)

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