Ten years after the Great Recession, AAC&U’s latest round of employer surveys sought to better understand the specifics and nuances of what really matters for employment for new college graduates. Conducted from May 17 to June 1, 2018, this round of employer research not only surveyed chief executive officers, presidents, and/or other “C-suite” executives (e.g., chief operating officers) but also included a parallel survey of nonexecutive hiring managers, in part to determine if there is a significant disconnect between the perceptions and expectations of C-suite executives and those who are actually charged with evaluating candidates for positions. The findings match well with data emerging from other reports and are consistent with trends observed in AAC&U’s 2013 report.

Specifically, the 2018 survey found that “when hiring recent graduates, business executives and hiring managers place a high priority on demonstrated proficiency in a variety of skill and knowledge areas that cut across majors.” For example, the ability to effectively communicate orally was rated as the most desired skill by both groups. Hiring managers also reported that ethical judgment and decision-making, the ability to work in teams, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings were very important skills they were seeking in recent college graduates. This is similar to the top-rated skills by business executives, who included critical thinking and analytical reasoning, as well as the ability to work independently, among their most highly sought attributes. (The top graph on page 15 summarizes the skills valued most highly by both groups of respondents.) It is important to note that those who actually perform the task of hiring graduates from our institutions value these skills even more than executives.

Employers are also in search of job candidates who have had specific educational experiences that serve to develop desirable skills and prepare new hires for success in their positions (see the bottom graph on page 15). At the top of the list, both hiring managers and business executives reported that they would be much more likely to hire candidates who had experience through an internship or apprenticeship with a company or organization. Hiring managers also value a range of experiential learning opportunities, such as service learning, undergraduate research, and community engagement projects with diverse populations. In addition to community engagement and undergraduate research, business executives would be much more likely to hire candidates who participated in writing-intensive courses or completed advanced senior projects such as a thesis. Many of the common attributes of these experiences are that they provide graduates with learning opportunities that either closely mirror real-world experiences or indeed actually occur within real-world settings.

Unpublished qualitative responses from AAC&U’s 2018 employer survey provide a richer picture regarding what employers seek in recent college graduates. All survey respondents were