GPA Is Not Enough:

The Workforce Need We Don't Measure

Executive Briefing

The Hiring Problem

On paper, Nate was one of the most incredible candidates I had ever seen. Armed with an undergraduate degree from one of the most competitive liberal arts colleges in the nation, he had gone on to receive a master's degree from a top 15 business school. He had scored in the 95th percentile on every standardized test he had ever taken and left both his undergraduate and graduate programs with a 3.9 GPA and *summa cum laude* honors. Sure, his interview had seemed a little awkward, but I reasoned that he was probably just nervous. There was no way I could pass on somebody this credentialed, right? Ignoring that nagging voice in the back of my head, I heartily endorsed Nate's hiring.

It was a disaster.

Don't get me wrong, Nate was really smart. He had all the technical capabilities I could have asked for. But he struggled in our collaborative environment and was often at a loss to communicate his ideas in a way that resonated with his colleagues. Even more damaging, I quickly discovered that Nate didn't adapt well to the changing demands of our rapidly-evolving technology business. He was often frozen, unable to synthesize the knowledge he gained from one set of problems so that he could apply his learning to a new challenge.

Nate knew it. He resigned six months into the job, and we were out the time, effort, and money that it took to recruit and train him.

Sarah was the complete opposite. She came to us from a temp agency and, on paper, she didn't look all that impressive. She had dropped out of a small state school's engineering program after just three semesters. She landed in Texas when she and her husband decided to move closer to his family for better job prospects. She had held a series of odd office jobs in the meantime. There was nothing about her resume that suggested she would be a good fit for the role we had available.

I changed my opinion of Sarah within five minutes of starting the interview. Sarah was a clear and articulate communicator and exhibited a hunger to learn that I thought matched our environment. The series of odd jobs was a testament to Sarah's abilities to adapt and to overcome adversity. She had worked with all sorts of people, and in each circumstance, she had emerged as a leader. Most importantly, when I challenged Sarah with novel problems, she showed an incredible ability to pull from her past experiences to develop unusual, and unusually effective, solutions.

Sarah has been a rousing success. She has now been with several of our companies in roles ranging from customer service to accounting to project management to product leadership. Last month, she was recognized as one of forty people under 40 years old who have made unique and lasting contributions to our industry.

The educational landscape is replete with credentials and measurement signals: GPAs, test scores, degrees, and certifications. But, somehow, these are not the decisive factors in employment outcomes.

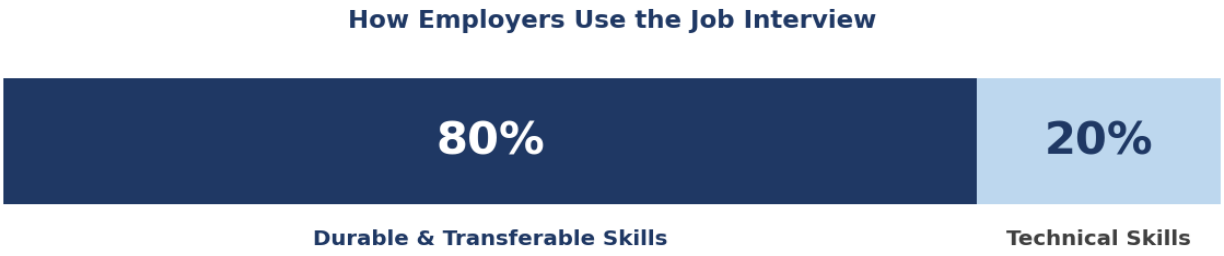
Why do employers consistently screen for, make hiring decisions around, and base retention choices on qualities that schools rarely measure?

> *"Why do employers consistently screen for, make hiring decisions around, and base retention choices on qualities that schools rarely measure?"*

What the Interview Reveals

Look at nearly any set of interview questions, including the ones that you have asked and answered, and you'll probably find queries like these:

- How do you prioritize your work?
- Describe how you deal with conflict in the workplace.
- How do you stay motivated?
- How do you learn a new skill?
- How do you manage your stress?
- Describe a workplace challenge and how you overcame it.



This is a consistent experience across all industries and roles. We spend about 20% of the job interview talking about technical skills, a combination of knowledge, conceptual understanding, and task-specific operational capabilities, and about 80% of the job interview establishing whether the candidate has enduring capacities that transfer across contexts.

One reason for this behavior is that educators have a time-tested, normative, familiar, and agreed upon common language that serves as a shortcut for communicating proficiency with technical and academic skills.

It's the grade point average. The GPA. The transcript.

If you received a passing grade in Algebra I, we should be reasonably assured that you know the rudiments of Algebra I.

If you graduate with a certificate in cybersecurity, it's a fair bet that you have at least a passing familiarity with cybersecurity.

If you get a degree in finance, you probably know the basics of financial statement analysis.

Over the years, we have supplemented and enhanced the central GPA metric with ancillary measures and recognitions that provide additional detail and context. These include standardized test scores, workforce certificates, and degrees. While there are some minor variations across domains and jurisdictions, for the most part we are all familiar with how these guideposts are measured and reported and, more importantly, with what they tell us about a graduate or a candidate for employment. They are the subject of school board meetings, the foundational matter of educational research, and the default screening mechanism that employers use to determine whether a potential employee has the essential technical skills required to succeed in the available job.

Schools and businesses have optimized for these metrics. But we struggle to systematically measure, assess, and communicate proficiency in capacities like resilience, judgment, collaboration, professionalism, initiative, and leadership. Because we cannot measure these capacities with anything approaching the precision of technical skills, employers are left to their own devices in determining whether a candidate has all the capabilities that a job really requires. At best, employers are reduced to asking oddball questions in the interview; at worst, they invest weeks or months in hiring and training only to find out later that the candidate does not have what it takes to do the job.

> *"The jarring truth is that we cannot justify ignoring something just because we cannot measure it perfectly."*

The Three Dimensions of Workforce Development

The business community looks to the education community to develop people who can meet current and emerging workforce needs. But, because of the limits of our measurement systems, we forget that educators provide for three related but distinct sets of capabilities through three related but distinct processes.

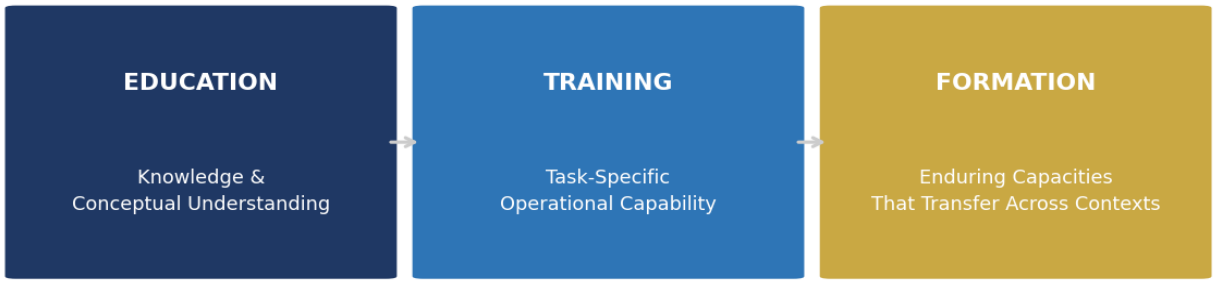
We tend to use the word education in its broadest possible sense, allowing it to be an umbrella term for all the benefits that schools deliver. But education, properly understood, is only one of the three activities in which schools engage. Education's goal, in this narrower sense, is to impart knowledge and conceptual understanding. Knowledge includes mastery of the basic grammar required to read, write, and do mathematics. Conceptual understanding unites this essential knowledge with technical theory, historical context, and scientific application.

A school's second function is to impart training. Training conveys task-specific operational capability. The results of training are most readily apparent in career and technical offerings like machining or welding, but training extends beyond these traditionally blue-collar realms to include occupations like software development, robotics engineering, and accounting.

The success of education and training rests upon a foundation of formation. By formation I mean the development of enduring capacities that transfer across contexts. Formative capacities are called upon to complete almost any task, no matter the specific knowledge or concept being used, both to fulfill the demands of work and to meet the requirements of a fulfilling life outside of work.

Educators form students in myriad ways, both inside and outside of the classroom. They build students' capacities through classroom discussion, athletic competitions, fine arts exhibits, and club meetings. Formation is why we fund the football team, hold annual patriotic shows, and devote time to band recitals and school plays. We know intuitively that formation is critical, but to our great frustration when it is time to measure an educational institution's progress or to assess a candidate's fit for a job opening, the only data we have available are test scores and academic grades. Without metrics for attention, perseverance, leadership, and collaboration, our vision for workforce development narrows.

The Three Dimensions of Workforce Development



The importance of formation to workforce development does not in any way diminish the necessity of technical rigor and academic credentials. Technical skills and academic knowledge matter as much as they ever have. Instead, the modern economy is rediscovering that training and education work together with formation to prepare workers who can keep pace with technological and economic change. It's not that training and education matter less; it's that they are less effective when isolated from formative capacity.

> *"It's not that training and education matter less; it's that they are less effective when isolated from formative capacity."*

Why This Matters More in the Age of AI

Proper educational and workforce development frameworks have always been built around these three essential activities. And we have always struggled to measure the outputs of formation. But today, we can ill afford to diminish efforts to develop capacities that are hard to measure in favor of those that are easier to measure.

By now, we've all heard claims that AI will make most white-collar jobs obsolete in the next five years. Luminaries like Nobel Prize winner Geoffrey Hinton are advising people to shift to blue-collar fields, like plumbing and roofing, as these manual trades seem to have less exposure to the promises and perils of artificial intelligence. Microsoft Research has helpfully provided us with an endangered jobs list and a companion list of the occupations least likely to be impacted by AI.

This same sort of bifurcated thinking — white collar jobs imperiled, blue collar jobs protected — permeates education policy and workforce discussions at the highest levels. Suddenly, trade schools are chic.

But the workforce landscape is a bit more nuanced than this. The white collar/blue collar dichotomy is not wrong so much as it is incomplete. Instead of focusing our conversation on what jobs will be done by AI in the future, we should be thinking about how human work and machine work differ. If we can understand that distinction, then we can make the necessary adjustments to our education paradigms such that we continue to meet the workforce needs of the AI economy.

Humans approach tasks in two ways. One way to approach tasks is narrowly, symbolically, representationally, and abstractly. This approach creates a model of the world (representation) and then focuses on particular parts of that model in order to foster the conditions for certainty and control. It creates categories and then fits experiences into those categories. Language and mathematics are the primary tools we use to do this. They are symbolic representations of the world that allow us to make fine discriminations.

A second approach is to see the world broadly and grasp context. This approach is relational, embodied, and comfortable with ambiguity. It deals in metaphor, interactions, and judgment. We take in information about the world as it is, which provides the material we use for narrowly refined application.

The tasks at which AI excels are narrow, symbolic, representational, abstract, and categorical. This should not surprise us because most of the popular AI is based on large language models and language is the primary tool of representational thinking. So, we might expect AI to get better and better at doing things that are more technical and informational. This list includes information retrieval, procedural tasks, routine analysis, content generation, and technical assistance.

But it's the union of those two divergent ways of working that yields the greatest productivity. Yes, we can abstract and deal in representational models, but we also read context and interact with other living beings and adjust for ambiguity and adapt to our environments. These are human differentiators, and they are becoming increasingly important to the world of work. We may need fewer people who can complete rote transactions, but we will always need people who exhibit judgment, synthesize information, engender trust, discern wisely, and collaborate with other people and with the tools that make our jobs easier.

Industrial-era systems optimized for training, for workers who could reliably complete a series of mundane and repetitive tasks or effectively ply a particular trade. In the knowledge era we emphasized education, because the knowledge economy leveraged ideas and thinking that called for high human intellectual capital. In the age of AI systems will increasingly require that we combine training and education with formation as we reinvigorate the demand for relational capital in the modern economy.

Employers Already Know This

Employers have already adjusted their hiring practices in response to this dawning economic reality. The nonprofit America Succeeds studied 82 million job postings across twenty-two occupational sectors to identify the most commonly demanded skills. They found that seven of the ten most requested job skills were so-called durable skills, transferable human skills that hold value and relevance throughout a lifetime regardless of context, technologies, business models, industries, or cultural evolution. Their list includes capacities like leadership, character, collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, metacognition, mindfulness, growth mindset, and fortitude.

According to the America Succeeds research, employers seek durable skills four times more frequently than technical skills and demand for durable skills is highest in those jobs most likely to remain in demand throughout the AI era, jobs like management, business operations and engineering. By contrast, jobs at the greatest risk of automation were less likely to actively seek durable skills in candidates.

In Texas, 64% of more than 7.5 million job postings representing 99,000 companies requested at least one durable skill. This frequency exceeds the overall average for U. S. job postings. Almost half of all Texas job postings call for a facility with communication, followed by leadership, metacognition, and critical thinking.

In research commissioned by Western Governors University, UpSkill America reveals which skills employers prioritize for early-career hires and how they identify these attributes. Their findings suggest that employers prioritize attitudes of professionalism, which include punctuality and respect for organizational norms, and coachability, a willingness to accept feedback and an eagerness to learn and apply new skills. Specific traits that are associated with these attitudes are integrity, teamwork, attention to detail, communication, and critical thinking.

UpSkill America also compared findings across different industry sectors, organization sizes, and organization types. While the combinations shifted slightly depending upon the context, the overwhelming consensus is that "employers want candidates who are reliable, detail-oriented, honest, and team-minded" and that these attributes form "a near-universal baseline" among employers. The research concludes, "These are seen as non-negotiables for entry-level hires across industries, sizes, and organizational structures."

Because reliable metrics for durable skills are so hard to find, employers surveyed by UpSkill America use a range of methods to evaluate candidates. These include carefully structured interviews, skills demonstrations, and reference checks. A little more than half of the respondents used some sort of formal assessment while about 20% employed detailed simulations.

Studies by LinkedIn, the World Economic Forum, and the National Association of Colleges and Employers have produced similar findings. The point is that the workforce already looks for and rewards formative capacities, even when education institutions do not systematically report them.

> *"Employers seek durable skills four times more frequently than technical skills — and demand is highest in the jobs most likely to endure the AI era."*

The Measurement Opportunity

Frameworks and skills outlooks like those provided by America Succeeds, LinkedIn, and the World Economic Forum are useful because they make human capacities more visible institutionally. Durable skills are manifestations of formative development, and formation is increasingly essential in an AI economy. But the fact remains that we lack a consistent, consensus, well-understood, and shared language for evaluating and measuring the presence or absence of these newly rediscovered foundational pillars of workforce success. While many education providers are rushing to respond to employer needs by introducing durable and transferable skills programming, few are doing the hard but necessary work to ensure that we can evaluate the results of that programming. Absent standardized measurement mechanisms, these efforts are likely to be rendered less effective and more difficult to scale.

To be sure, we cannot fully quantify human formation. Nor would we want to. A person can't be reduced to scores and human flourishing will never be fully measurable. But we can and should create meaningful indicators of enduring capacities that matter in the workplace. In fact, employers routinely embrace efforts to measure the unmeasurable. We use a variety of tools to assess leadership potential, culture, employee and customer engagement, trust, customer satisfaction, and brand strength. None of these are, strictly speaking, quantifiable. But we have developed a range of readily available and broadly understood proxies that allow us to chart a path towards continuous improvement in these important areas.

Meaningful indicators, even imperfect and imprecise ones, matter. They raise visibility, give shape to incentives, and drive accountability and investment. Formation is an essential dimension of workforce preparation. Formative development deserves at least as much of our attention as algebra retention.

Complements to the GPA

The GPA was designed to provide evidence of academic achievement. Workforce certifications were designed to provide evidence of technical capabilities and material skills. These measures, and the universe of metrics that surround and support them, capture academic performance, content mastery, and procedural achievement. They have been and remain effective signals to

employers of a candidate's proficiency in these areas. Because they are so effective, we rarely have to talk about them in the context of the job interview.

Increasingly, though, employers are basing hiring decisions on evidence of proficiency in durable or transferable skills. In the absence of a supplement to the traditional metrics provided by the GPA and workforce credentials, employers are developing their own mechanisms to gauge the presence or absence of these foundational capacities.

The current moment calls for a supplemental set of metrics that can provide this valuable information to students and to potential employers. These measures would not be replacements for the signals provided by the GPA and workforce certifications. They would be additional documentation that evidence to employers the durable skills students have cultivated in education in addition to their academic and technical skills.

Important work is just beginning to measure durable skills. America Succeeds has created a set of tools under the moniker Pathsmith that it seeks to embed in curriculum, professional development pathways, and assessments. Some providers, like LER.me, have used this framework to create assessments and credential around the durable skills. Similarly, the Education Design Lab has created micro-credentials that represent core durable skills, including empathy, initiative, and intercultural fluency. To earn a micro-credential, a learner must demonstrate proficiency via a performance-based assessment in four core sub-competencies.

Closer to home, Lone Star College — Tomball has launched its GPA+ initiative as a part of its strategic plan. GPA+ takes the position that durable skills are a core but often overlooked part of the current curriculum. Instead of creating new assessments and credentials, the Lone Star College — Tomball team seeks to surface the development of transferable skills by mapping existent student learning outcomes (SLOs) to the various durable skills frameworks. They then leverage this mapping and students' course grades to produce the Transferable Skills Index and reporting designed to be shared with students, educators, and employers. Still in its initial pilot, the college plans to deploy additional tools, including assignment-level mapping, technology that can provide real-time feedback to students and teachers, and mechanisms to account for the influence of extracurricular and cocurricular activities on the development of durable skills. A sample of Lone Star College — Tomball's proposed employer report can be found at the end of this briefing.

Toward a More Complete Workforce Model

Workforce development requires education, training, and formation. We measure what students know using the GPA and standardized tests. We measure what workers can do through technical degrees and workforce certifications. The next challenge is learning how to recognize and share the human capacities that necessarily bridge the gap between knowledge and application. Emerging durable skills and transferable skills frameworks have alerted us to what employers need from employees to ensure reliability and executional effectiveness.

The emerging economy simply cannot afford to operationalize only two of the three workforce domains. We need educated individuals, trained workers, and formed people. By recognizing that GPA is not enough, we can leverage all three domains to produce a workforce capable of adapting to the ongoing economic evolution.

> *"We need educated individuals, trained workers, and formed people."*

About the Author

Kenneth Odom, PhD serves as co-founder, CEO, and President of a group of technology and service companies in the environmental and industrial services industry. A former school board president and master trustee, he has spent his career evaluating talent and governance across both business and education. He is chair of the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce's Business and Education Partnership and the author of *10 Questions Every School Board Member Should Ask*. Learn more at www.gpaisnotenough.com.

APPENDIX

Sample Employer Report: Durable Skills Index

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS EMPLOYMENT PROFILE

Jordan Hastings ■ Business Administration, A.A.S. ■ Lone Star College — Tomball ■ Spring 2026

Employment Readiness Summary

READINESS RATING	OVERALL INDEX	PERFORMANCE INDEX	SKILLS ASSESSED
Hire Ready *Development Recommended*	**71%** *Performance × Coverage*	**79%** *Avg. across assessed skills*	**9 of 10** *Transferable skills covered*

Job Task Readiness

Job Task Category	Transferable Skill(s)	Score	Band	Employer Note
Written & Verbal Communication	Communication	87%	**Proficient**	Ready for client correspondence, business reports, and internal presentations
Teamwork & Group Collaboration	Collaboration	94%	**Excellent**	Highly effective in team environments; navigates group dynamics and shared goals well
Project Leadership & Ownership	Leadership	100%	**Excellent**	Demonstrates initiative, accountability, and ability to guide team efforts
Workplace Ethics & Integrity	Character	100%	**Excellent**	Consistent ethical conduct; reliable and professional in academic settings
Analytical Problem-Solving	Critical Thinking	57%	**Emerging**	Development area — structured support recommended for roles requiring complex analysis or independent decisions
Adaptability & Learning Agility	Growth Mindset, Metacognition, Fortitude	75%	**Proficient**	Self-directed learner; responds constructively to setbacks and new challenges
Organizational & Civic Awareness	Citizenship	75%	**Proficient**	Understands professional norms, institutional responsibility, and workplace standards
Creative & Innovative Thinking	Creativity	N/A	***Not Assessed***	Not assessed in current coursework — not an absence of ability

Hiring Manager Notes

Demonstrated Strengths	Development Consideration
Jordan demonstrates Excellent performance in Leadership (100%), Character (100%), and Collaboration (94%) — the skills most directly tied to reliable, team-oriented performance. Communication at the Proficient level (87%) supports client-facing and cross-functional	Critical Thinking scored in the Emerging band (57%). Roles requiring independent data analysis, complex problem-solving, or autonomous decision-making may benefit from structured mentoring or a development plan in the first 90 days. Creativity was not assessed in

Demonstrated Strengths	Development Consideration
roles. Adaptability indicators (Growth Mindset, Fortitude, Metacognition) are consistently Proficient, suggesting a candidate who will onboard and develop effectively.	current coursework and should not be inferred as absent.

See following page for skill definitions, scoring methodology, performance band reference, and important limitations.

REFERENCE & METHODOLOGY

Scores reflect graded academic performance mapped to the America Succeeds Transferable Skills framework (derived from analysis of 82 million job postings). This page explains how scores are calculated, defines each skill, and describes performance bands and limitations.

How Scores Are Calculated

(1) Course-to-Skill Mapping: each course is mapped to the skills its graded assessments demonstrate, with institutional weights summing to 1.0 per course. **(2) Skill Score:** Earned Points ÷ Possible Points, where Earned = Σ (grade band × skill weight) across mapped courses. Grade bands: A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D/F = 1. **(3) Overall Benchmark Index:** Performance Index (average across assessed skills) × Coverage Rate (skills assessed ÷ 10).

Skill Definitions

Skill	Definition
Communication	Conveys ideas effectively in written, verbal, and visual forms across diverse audiences.
Critical Thinking	Analyzes information objectively and draws well-reasoned conclusions to solve complex problems.
Collaboration	Works effectively with others, contributing equitably and leveraging diverse perspectives.
Leadership	Guides and motivates others toward shared goals while demonstrating integrity and accountability.
Citizenship	Understands civic responsibility and one's role in contributing positively to communities.
Character	Demonstrates ethical behavior, honesty, and responsibility in decisions and actions.
Growth Mindset	Believes abilities grow through effort and dedication; learns constructively from setbacks.
Metacognition	Monitors and regulates one's own thinking and learning processes to improve performance.
Fortitude	Persists toward goals despite challenge, frustration, or adversity without abandoning effort.
Creativity	Generates novel ideas by connecting disparate concepts and embracing imaginative risk-taking.

Performance Band Reference

Band	Score Range	What It Signals to Employers
Excellent	90–90%	Consistently strong. Minimal supervision expected in tasks tied to this skill.
Proficient	75–89%	Solid, reliable performance. Standard onboarding and normal feedback loops should be sufficient.
Developing	60–74%	Skill is present but not yet consistent. Consider targeted assignments or mentoring.
Emerging	Below 60%	Limited demonstration. A structured development plan is recommended where this skill is central to the role.
Not Assessed	N/A	No aligned coursework in the assessed term. Does not indicate absence of ability.

Important Limitations

Scope of evidence. This report reflects demonstrated performance in formal, graded coursework only. Skills developed through internships, employment, volunteer work, or co-curricular activities are not captured here and may significantly supplement what appears in this document.

Not a personality assessment. Scores are derived from academic outcomes, not behavioral or psychological instruments. They reflect what a student demonstrated in graded contexts — not inherent traits or potential.
Coverage gaps. A "Not Assessed" result may reflect program structure or scheduling constraints, not student choice. It should not be interpreted as an absence of ability.
Questions. Contact Ms. Patricia Nguyen, Lone Star College — Tomball, or the institution's academic records office. Framework: America Succeeds, "Empowering Learners for School, Work, and Life" (2024).