

WREA Career and Employment Survey from Recent Graduates - Summary Report

Introduction

Findings presented below highlight responses to the *Career and Employment Survey - Graduates* that was administered in spring 2022 as part of a larger multi-institution research project on ‘The Path from Education to the Workforce.’ These findings examine students’ participation and engagement in work-related experiential activities (WREAs) since spring 2021 and their subsequent transition to the workforce. WREAs include internships, co-ops, practica, job shadows, and other similar opportunities that offer students real-world experience with hands-on skill development under the guidance of business and faculty mentors. This report draws on responses from respondents who participated in the spring 2021 WREA survey as an undergraduate student and graduated prior to spring 2022. Participating institutions are Georgia Institute of Technology, Mercer University, The University of Georgia, Savannah State University, and Valdosta State University. This survey was administered once, in the final year of the larger research project. More details about the project can be found at <https://www.ihe.uga.edu/WREA>.

Survey Design and Data Collection

The survey instrument was developed by the researchers and administered by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVI) Survey Research and Evaluation Center staff. The instrument was pilot tested and administered in Qualtrics, an online survey hosting software. The survey was sent to students who opted-in during the spring 2021 WREA survey distribution and who provided their personal email address. Survey invitations utilized unique URLs so that each response could be linked to the list of selected students and to ensure respondents participated only once. Survey invitations were sent in March, and reminders sent through the end of April, 2022. Per the IRB-approved procedure, respondents who indicated that they wished to be included were included in a gift card drawing. Through a computer-driven random selection, five respondents who completed the survey were chosen and sent an Amazon e-gift card.

Findings

Of the 150 surveys distributed, valid and useable responses were received from 52 (response rate of 34.7%). Responses were received from respondents at two institutions: Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia. Shown in Table 1, 52.3% of the respondents identified as women, 43.5% were persons of color, and 8.7% were First Generation. Seventy percent of respondents were working full-time and 31% said that they were currently enrolled in graduate school (please note that respondents could be in both categories). For their post-graduation employment, 37% secured a job where they had previously been involved in a WREA.

As shown in Table 2, respondents affirmed the value of preparation that helped to achieve successful employment. When asked what career competencies were needed in their current employment, respondents most often indicated that skills in critical thinking, time management, communication, and knowledge of digital technology were most important. Applying knowledge from class had the lowest mean score, indicating that respondents perceived it as less important than other skills.

A number of geographic factors also influenced respondents' employment decisions. As shown in Table 3, 'the time it takes to get to your job' received the highest mean score, followed by 'access to parks and recreation' while 'being in a rural setting' received the lowest mean score. Although no causal relationship can be ascertained from this limited sample, findings lead us to consider respondents' general preference for urban or more densely populated areas.

The survey also asked about the relationship between employment and college major; 95% of students reported that they were working in a field related to their major. In addition, 95% of the respondents said they received a job offer within six months of graduation. The survey also gauged how students learned about their current employer. Respondents reported that online postings (30.8%) and university faculty/staff members (19.2%) were most helpful in connecting them with their current employer.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Percent of valid responses*
Gender		
Male	21	47.7
Female	23	52.3
Race		
White	26	56.5
Black or African American	2	2.2
Hispanic	7	15.2
Asian	9	19.6
Other	3	6.5
First Generation		
Yes	4	8.7
No	42	91.3
Enrolled in graduate school		
Yes	16	31.4
No	35	68.6
Current job related to major		
Yes	39	95.1
No	2	4.9
Participated in WREA with eventual employer		
Yes	15	36.6
No	26	63.4
Work modality		
Remote	8	19.5
In-person	9	22.0
Hybrid (remote and in-person)	24	58.5
Mean Age	23.8	

*Ns include all valid responses to each question; they do not include respondents who did not identify for the category. The total number of survey respondents was N=52. Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100.

Table 2
*Career Competencies Needed in Current Employment**

	Mean	SD
In your job, how important are the following skills? ^a		
Improving critical thinking	3.95	.316
Learning how to manage time	3.82	.446
Effective verbal communication	3.82	.385
Effective written communication	3.75	.439
Understanding how to utilize digital technology to solve problems	3.75	.494
Interacting with others in a professional setting	3.72	.554
Learning how to find answers to questions quickly	3.68	.526
Learning how to work with people of diverse backgrounds	3.64	.537
Having professional relationships with employers	3.60	.632
Being guided by a mentor	3.50	.679
Understanding how to advance in my field	3.50	.679
Developing skills as a leader	3.40	.778
Understanding how to connect to the profession	3.35	.662
Applying knowledge learned from class	2.85	.834

* N= 52

^a 1= not at all important, 4= very important

Table 3
*Geographic Factors Influencing Job Decisions**

	Mean	SD
When considering a current or future position, how important were the following items? ^a		
Time it takes to get to your job	3.05	.846
Access to parks and recreation	2.98	.947
Ability to work from home	2.73	1.012
Close to family and friends	2.65	.736
Urban setting	2.52	.905
Access to shopping	2.35	.949
Access to public transportation	2.23	.947
Rural setting	1.58	.813

* N= 52

^a 1= not at all important, 4= very important

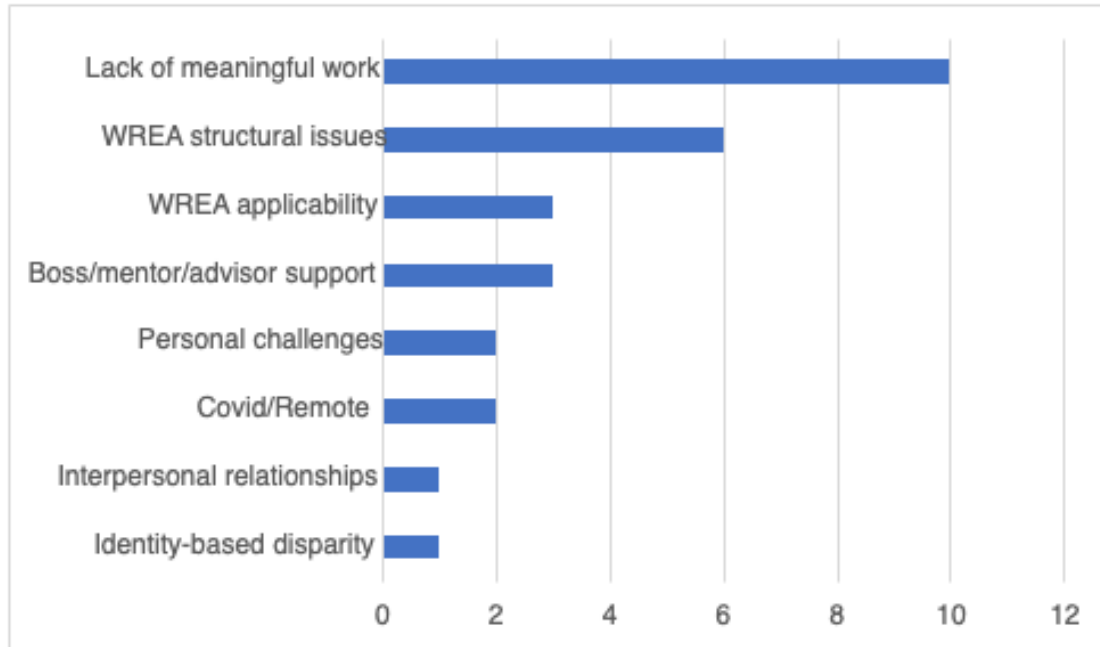
Three questions on the survey provided open-ended responses. To further probe respondent experiences during their WREAs, we conducted an iterative coding process. Drawing on NACE competencies (<https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>), three researchers inductively analyzed 25% of the responses for each question, creating primary and secondary codes. These researchers then met to review, create,

and define a series of codes that would be used for the remaining responses and ensure coder agreement. After agreeing on definitions, with particular attention to secondary codes for questions 2 and 3, the questions were divided up among the researchers, with each coder analyzing one question. Figures 1 and 2 show the secondary code categories. In the first open-ended question, respondents were asked to describe the most helpful skill they developed during their WREA experiences. As shown in Figure 1 below, responding alumni reported that professionalism, communication skills, and a broader career and self-development were the most important skills they developed during their WREA participation. These skills underscore the importance of WREAs in facilitating the transition to the modern office environment. Conversely, Figure 2 is a breakdown of the aspects of WREAs that respondents found least helpful. Overwhelmingly, there was a strong concentration of responses that described a lack of meaningful work and/or broader structural issues with the WREAs. These responses provide insight into students' perceptions on the value of their WREAs and suggest that, when designed purposefully, students' participation in a WREA can lead to favorable outcomes. It seems likely that intentionally-designed experiential opportunities will offer students a positive experience and the opportunity to acquire skills that facilitate student's transition into the workforce.

Figure 1
Most Important Skills Developed During WREAs



Figure 2
Least Helpful Experience During WREAs



Conclusion & Future Implications

While we recognize the limited number of survey responses received, the data highlight a few important findings. First and foremost, results herein show that computer science and engineering students who participated in WREAs are experiencing positive post-graduation outcomes. All respondents were either enrolled in graduate school, employed full-time, or both. Secondly, based on responses, it appears that the college experience (alongside WREAs) is preparing students well for their transition to the workforce.

Almost all respondents in this survey were employed in a major-related field and over one-third of students took a job with a company that had previously hired them for a WREA. Relatedly, respondents reported that the modern work environment requires a broad set of skills in order to succeed, ranging from critical thinking to varying forms of communication. Finally, Table 3 revealed the varying degrees to which geographic factors influenced respondents' job selection. Unsurprisingly, two of the top three variables mentioned by respondents in terms of importance were related to convenience and flexibility of the positions themselves (time it takes to get to work and the ability to work from home). It is uncertain if or how much current post-pandemic employment practices may be influencing new employee preferences. Future studies may wish to further explore this relationship.