



NACE COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT TOOL

User Manual for Employers



INTRODUCTION

For college students and their future employers, a central purpose of pursuing higher education is to develop the core competencies necessary to enter the workforce and launch successful careers. Ideally, students leave their universities ready to navigate the job market, transition into their first professional roles, and become valuable contributors to their employers. However, while both stakeholders historically have viewed the purpose of college as career preparation, employers consistently identify a “skills gap” among graduating seniors. According to a [2022 report from the Chronicle for Higher Education](#), only 11% of business leaders strongly agree that graduating students have the skills their businesses need.

Students need career-ready skills to kickstart their entry into the workforce, and employers need career-ready graduates to help their organizations thrive. Many colleges and universities have responded to this dual need by integrating [experiential learning](#) into their curricula, enabling students to step away from traditional classroom learning and participate in internships, co-ops, service projects, study abroad, project-based learning, and more. Experiential learning provides students with hands-on opportunities to develop career readiness competencies in professional settings, bridging the theory of the classroom with the practicalities of the workplace. As a matter of [best practice](#), students engaged in experiential learning reflect on their experiences through written assignments and conversations with faculty advisers or mentors in career services. Through continuous reflection, students integrate their experiences in the field with their academic studies and their emerging professional identities.

More and more universities are investing in experiential learning programs to address the skills gap, maintain relevance, and deliver a return on investment for students. What role do employers have to play in this movement for career readiness education, beyond simply hiring and supervising students? Employers may not have the resources of a campus career services center, but they are uniquely situated to provide student workers with opportunities to reflect on and learn from their work experiences.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has developed the NACE Competency Assessment Tool, which comprises a set of eight assessments that employers can easily implement to help students assess and reflect on their proficiency in core competencies for career readiness. Each assessment focuses on one of eight career readiness competencies critical to day-one success in any job, regardless of industry:



- **Career and Self-development:** Proactively develop oneself and one's career through continual personal and professional learning, awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, navigation of career opportunities, and networking to build relationships within and without one's organization.



- **Communication:** Clearly and effectively exchange information, ideas, facts, and perspectives with persons inside and outside of an organization.



- **Critical Thinking:** Identify and respond to needs based upon an understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information.



- **Equity & Inclusion:** Demonstrate the awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills required to equitably engage and include people from different local and global cultures. Engage in anti-oppressive practices that actively challenge the systems, structures, and policies of racism and inequity.



- **Leadership:** Recognize and capitalize on personal and team strengths to achieve organizational goals.



- **Professionalism:** Knowing work environments differ greatly, understand and demonstrate effective work habits, and act in the interest of the larger community and workplace.



- **Teamwork:** Build and maintain collaborative relationships to work effectively toward common goals, while appreciating diverse viewpoints and shared responsibilities.



- **Technology:** Understand and leverage technologies ethically to enhance efficiencies, complete tasks, and accomplish goals.



Developed in collaboration with experts in career development and talent acquisition, the eight NACE Career Readiness Competencies and the NACE Competency Assessment Tool provide a framework and vocabulary for benchmarking skill development. The tool includes a rating system with four levels, from Emerging Knowledge to Comprehension, Early Application, and Advance Application. Students and early-career professionals can use the tool to self-assess their proficiency across the eight competencies, and employers can use the tool to evaluate students' growth and development in each area. Used in tandem for both self-assessment and performance reviews, the tool provides a robust foundation for reflection, coaching, and goal-setting.

This manual offers a quick-start guide on how employers can implement the NACE Competency Assessment Tool in their work with students as well as early-career professionals. While everyone can benefit from working with the tool as a means for reflection and assessment, it is especially impactful for coaching college student workers, interns and co-ops, and recent graduates, whose first steps into the workforce are critical for competency development and career success. The next three sections outline the benefits of using the tool with each of these groups. The guide then wraps up with best practices for implementing the tool in your organization.

USING THE TOOL WITH COLLEGE STUDENT WORKERS

One clear opportunity area for employers seeking to implement career readiness initiatives can be found right on college campuses. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), most students spend at least some of their college careers working part- or full-time jobs on or near campus during the academic year. While working students earn a paycheck to offset tuition costs and may even add relevant experience to their resumes, [research shows](#) that time spent on the job is negatively correlated with academic performance, creating what student affairs leaders have called “[the working student dilemma](#).” Following [evidence-based recommendations](#), faculty and administrators often advise students to work no more than 10 to 15 hours per week, and at many institutions, students employed in Federal Work-Study jobs are not permitted to work more than 15 to 20 hours per week. However, trading fewer hours and a lower paycheck for more study time is simply not feasible for all students, particularly those with high financial need facing the rising costs of college tuition.

Employers on and near campus can use the NACE Competency Assessment Tool to create more meaningful work experiences that enhance, rather than detract from, students’ classroom learning. For students who need or want to work during the academic year, the opportunity to reflect on and develop career readiness competencies can help them connect their paid work to their academic studies and career goals, making a job worth so much more than a paycheck. A [2019 study](#) from Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education reported that on-campus student employment programs that include “frequent opportunities for student articulation of learning and reflection” are more likely to “provide students with meaningful learning and engagement opportunities that can help with retention and build career readiness skills.” With some intention and planning, employers can alleviate the stress of balancing the tradeoff between school and work by helping students meet their financial needs while also preparing for a successful career after graduation. Plus, employers are likely to benefit when they step into the role of coach and mentor: College student workers may be more likely to stick with paying jobs that offer meaningful connections to their career goals, resulting in lower turnover rates among an already transient workforce.



USING THE TOOL WITH INTERNS AND CO-OPS

Internships, cooperative education programs (or co-ops), and similar work-based learning engagements give students an immersive look into their desired career path. Employers supervising these experiences can play a pivotal role in helping students cultivate career readiness competencies, but internships often lack a robust program of mentorship, feedback, and reflection.

Traditional frameworks for internships and similar experiences involve a handoff from university to employer and back again. The university facilitates the connection between the interested student and the employer, the employer facilitates work experiences for the student, and the university facilitates student learning through reflection assignments. To make good on the promise of experiential learning, employers also have a critical role to play in the reflection and learning process. After all, a student intern's supervisor witnesses their work firsthand. They're in the ideal position to help that student observe, analyze, and expand their personal and professional growth in the workplace. What's more, [studies](#) on internship quality consistently demonstrate that well-structured programs that incorporate key milestones for assessment and feedback have the highest rates of intern satisfaction and productivity.

The NACE Competency Assessment Tool provides a framework for employers to import the reflection work typically associated with faculty advisers into the work setting. The benefits for doing so are vast. For students, ongoing reflection throughout an internship or similar experience in conversation with those closest to their work will lead to stronger learning outcomes. These guided conversations with professional mentors help students understand what skills they need to develop to succeed in their desired career path and that those skills matter. For employers, high-impact programming makes their internships and co-ops more desirable, enabling them to attract and retain top-quality students. Employers that use the tool to facilitate feedback and reflection foster strong relationships with student workers and, in turn, a strong talent pipeline of career-ready graduates, who go on to become day-one-ready employees.



USING THE TOOL WITH RECENT GRADUATES

Career readiness competency development is a lifelong journey that does not end when students graduate from college. Recent graduates entering their first full-time roles after college stand to benefit tremendously from opportunities to assess and reflect on their core skills. For employers seeking to foster mentorship around competency development for recent graduates, the NACE Competency Assessment Tool offers an excellent jumping-off point.

People of all ages and stages benefit personally and professionally from mentoring, but coaching and feedback are especially important for new employees entering the workforce for the first time. Employers that use the tool as a guide for self-assessments and performance reviews invest not only in their employees' development but in the overall growth of their organizations. Decades of research demonstrate that employees with strong mentors advance faster, reach higher pay levels, feel a stronger sense of commitment to their organizations, and enjoy overall higher levels of career satisfaction. Outside of work, they see physical and mental health benefits, including stronger self-esteem and easier work-life balance. Formal tools and programs for facilitating mentorship are especially beneficial for young professionals from historically marginalized backgrounds and, in turn, can lead to more diverse organizational leadership.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Successfully implementing the NACE Competency Assessment Tool with student workers and early-career employees starts with trusting relationships between interns or employees and their supervisors. Paired with an ongoing commitment to regularly performing tool-guided assessments, trust paves the way for open and honest feedback conversations, personal and professional growth, and organizational success.

1. Establish buy-in and trust.

Start by helping your student workers or early-career employees understand what the NACE Career Readiness Competencies are and how they build a foundation for success in the workplace and lifelong career management. Provide examples of how specific competencies show up in your work, and which of these core skills you view as personal strengths or areas for growth. Consider completing your own self-assessment using the tool, and share your results with your student workers. Connecting the competencies to your own professional journey will help students understand their relevance and importance, and will also prime them for an open and honest feedback conversation.

As a side note, before you even begin using the tool with students or early-career employees, you may also need to establish buy-in from the rest of your team or the leadership at your organization. Using this guide as a resource, present the business case for implementing the tool, highlighting its likely positive impact on recruitment, retention, and your overall talent pipeline. Once you secure buy-in across your organization, consider hosting a workshop on the tool to help managers get started with competency assessments on their own teams.

2. Build a regular cadence of tool-guided self-evaluations and performance reviews.

Use the tool to structure simultaneous self-evaluations, in which students rate their own proficiency across the eight competencies, and performance reviews, in which you rate your student workers. These should be conducted on a schedule that makes the most sense for the job lifecycle. If the job is ongoing, it likely makes sense to schedule these on a quarterly basis. For semester-length or seasonal appointments, as in the case of most internships and co-ops, plan to schedule assessments at the beginning, middle, and end of the term, so that students can assess growth throughout the experience. Student workers may be more likely to engage with the tool seriously if they have the opportunity to complete their self-evaluations while on the clock, so consider explicitly adding completion to their schedules.

Incorporating both self-evaluations and performance reviews enables student workers to be more active participants in coaching and development conversations. A regular practice of self-evaluation also helps students foster fluency in vocabulary for talking about their career readiness competencies. This comes in handy in future job-search and interview processes, when potential employers ask students to describe examples of their strengths in action.

3. Schedule a one-on-one conversation to talk through assessment results and set goals for growth.

After you complete your performance review and a student or employee completes their self-evaluation, schedule time to talk through your results one-on-one, ideally face-to-face. It can be helpful to provide students with a summary of your review in writing in advance of your meeting, so that they have time to process any constructive feedback in advance.

Start your conversation by affirming the student's strengths. Then, frame constructive feedback as professional development opportunities as opposed to personal weaknesses, and offer specific strategies for ways students can develop emerging competencies. On-campus employers have the benefit of being able to direct students to university resources, such as career services, for additional coaching opportunities. Be explicit about what success would look like in an emerging competency area and name specific behaviors that would demonstrate proficiency. *(See sample behaviors on the NACE website.)* Set specific benchmarks for progressing toward proficiency, and check back in about their progress in the lead-up to the next assessment milestone. Ultimately, your employee should walk away from this debrief with the message that you are committed to their success and ready to support their growth.

4. Use assessment data to inform professional development opportunities and improve programming.

Tool-guided assessments can help you identify professional development opportunity areas for individual students and employees. Budget for professional development opportunities is often limited, and assessment data can guide you toward which competency areas to prioritize for particular team members.

At the level of the organization, assessment data can also aid in informing and improving team-wide programming. For example, say you oversee a cohort-based student internship program and administer tool-guided assessments at the start of the cohort's experience. You can then analyze trends in students' self-evaluations, identify which competency areas the group has identified as key growth areas, and build responsive, in-house career readiness programming. If your organization implements the tool with early-career employees, managers across units could discuss key growth areas for recent graduates on their individual teams, identify commonalities, and invest in programming that creates value across the company.

5. Create a data-driven talent pipeline.

Through consistent application of the tool for self-evaluation and performance reviews, your organization can lay the foundation for a data-driven talent pipeline. If you implement the tool across your organization in assessments of interns and co-op students, you can use that data to inform recruiting and hiring decisions for full-time roles as those students prepare for graduation. For interns and co-ops who then become employees, their history of tool-guided assessments gives managers clear insights into their strengths and growth areas well before they dive into full-time roles. This level of detailed background information on new full-time employees opens up opportunities to design high-impact, intentional mentorship initiatives as they start their post-graduate careers.



WIN-WIN FOR STUDENTS, EARLY-CAREER EMPLOYEES, AND EMPLOYERS

Whether you supervise students in on-campus jobs, oversee interns or co-op students, or manage a team that includes recent college graduates, the NACE Competency Assessment Tool offer an easy-to-implement framework for structuring employee self-assessments and performance reviews. Employers can easily align the tool's eight assessments with existing employee review processes or use them to build new meaningful feedback mechanisms where they may not yet exist, as is often the case with on-campus jobs and internships.

The advantages for students and recent graduates are clear: Competency-based assessments give early-career employees the vocabulary to reflect on their strengths, understand their opportunity areas, and create plans for continued growth, all in conversation with their employers.

However, it is arguably employers that stand to benefit the most from using the NACE Competency Assessment Tool to incorporate career readiness competencies into their coaching and feedback processes. Given what we know about the importance of mentorship and coaching at work, employers that implement the tool are likely to see stronger relationships with and performance from early-career employees. The tool also provides goal posts for designing and leading attractive, high-impact experiential learning opportunities at your organization. Employers can use the tool to inform key objectives for interns and co-op students that go beyond on-the-job proficiency to encompass core transferable skills like communication, critical thinking, and equity and inclusion. Ultimately, implementing the NACE Competency Assessment Tool at your organization is not only great for the next generation of workers, but also an invaluable investment in your talent pipeline and future leadership.

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