High School Students' Views on Durable Skills: Perceived Importance, Skill Levels, and School Instruction

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Introduction

Durable skills are interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors important for adaptation to and performance in a variety of settings. They are widely viewed as essential for meeting employers' needs and preparing students for career success. Table 1 lists the durable skills examined in this brief, along with descriptions of each skill.

Table 1. Durable Skills and Descriptions

Durable skill	Skill description
Work ethic (professionalism)	Staying on task and avoiding distractions, adhering to social norms, managing time well, planning, paying attention to detail, persisting through challenges, and being dependable and goal-oriented
Collaboration (teamwork)	Being a cooperative, patient, and supportive team player, resolving conflicts, and being empathic and gracious
Resilience	Adapting to setbacks, remaining calm and managing stress, and being self-assured
Creativity	Enjoying thinking and the process of solving problems, preferring exposure to different ideas and ways of thinking, easily generating new and imaginative ideas
Leadership	Embracing opportunities to take charge, having a positive outlook, and being persuasive and assertive
Critical thinking	Considering ideas and information in order to make a determination, decision, or judgment
Communication	Knowing how to convey thoughts appropriately and effectively in the workplace

Durable skills help workers address workforce needs because they apply broadly across jobs and industries, even as technology and job requirements continue to change. Employer demand for these skills has increased substantially: The percentage of job postings requesting at least one durable skill rose from 64% in 2019–2020 to 76% in 2023–2024, and during the 2023–2024 period, nearly half of job postings requested three or more durable skills (America Succeeds, 2025). Employers are making durable skills even more of a priority as they continue to identify skills such as communication, professionalism (labeled here as work ethic), collaboration, critical thinking, leadership, creativity, and resilience as highly important for workforce success (America Succeeds, 2025; Brodnitz, 2024; Gray, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025). Yet results from the 2025 Job Outlook survey suggest that employers perceive proficiency gaps in

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durable skills among recent college graduates. Only about half of employers rated recent graduates as very or extremely proficient in communication (54%), critical thinking (56%), and professionalism (50%), and even fewer (31%) rated them as very or extremely proficient in leadership (Gray, 2025). In contrast, employers viewed graduates more favorably on teamwork (labeled here as collaboration), with 82% rating them as very or extremely proficient.

Fortunately, durable skills can be developed through appropriate training. High schools can play an important role in helping students develop the durable skills that prepare them for career success and meet evolving workforce needs. Schools can strengthen the connection between students' preparation and workforce expectations by integrating employer-valued skills into curricular decisions and leveraging work-based learning opportunities.

Although schools are places where students can engage in structured opportunities to learn and practice durable skills that support success in both education and the workplace (Bobek et al., 2026), educators continue to face challenges in developing these skills. As Crawford and Unger (2026) note, school administrators and teachers often "know which skills students likely need for success in whatever futures they choose to pursue, but we lack coherent approaches to developing them intentionally and well" (p. 1).

Evidence suggests that students recognize the importance of durable skills. In the 2024 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey, large majorities of college students rated skill competencies such as communication (96%), critical thinking (94%), teamwork (91%), professionalism (89%), and leadership (85%) as very or extremely important for career readiness (Gray, 2025). Smaller but sizable percentages rated themselves as very or extremely proficient in those same skills: communication (78%), critical thinking (81%), teamwork (84%), and leadership (66%). Although college students' perceptions of the importance of durable skills and their own proficiency in these skills are relatively clear, less is known about how college-bound high school students view these skills.

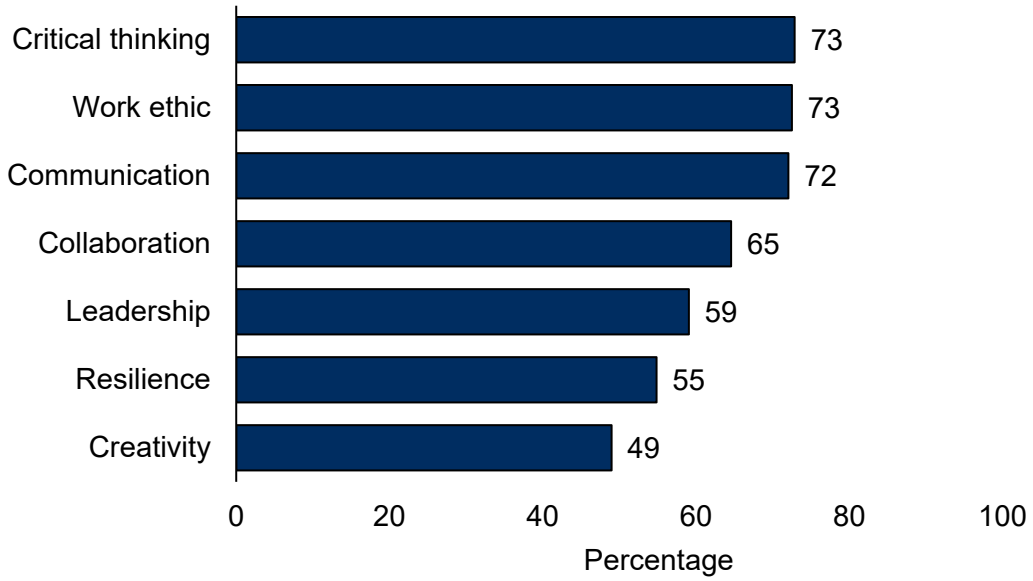
To better understand the perspectives of future workforce entrants on important career skills (including durable skills), we surveyed a random sample of high school students in Grades 11 and 12 who registered for the December 2024 or February 2025 ACT National test. At the time of ACT registration, all participating students had selected a career they planned to pursue; students who did not indicate a planned occupation or who reported being undecided were excluded from the study. Three questions in the online survey (part of a larger project) asked students to identify the skills they considered most important for success in their planned occupations, their perceived skill levels, and the extent to which these skills were taught in their schools. In this brief, we share findings from 2,294 high school students regarding their perspectives on durable skills (see the technical appendix for more details about the student sample and the survey questions).

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High School Students Consider Durable Skills Important for Future Career Success

Overall, many students identified durable skills as important for success in their planned careers (Figure 1). Nearly three quarters (72%–73%) of the surveyed students selected critical thinking, work ethic, and communication as the durable skills most important for them to have in order to do well in their planned careers. Two thirds (65%) identified collaboration as important. Lower but still substantial percentages of students reported that leadership (59%), resilience (55%), and creativity (49%) were among the most important durable skills for students entering the workforce.

Figure 1. Percentages of Students Rating Most Important Durable Skills for Students to Have to Do Well in Their Planned Careers (Unweighted *n* = 2,053)



Note. The *n* counts are the unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting (see the technical appendix for more details about weighting).

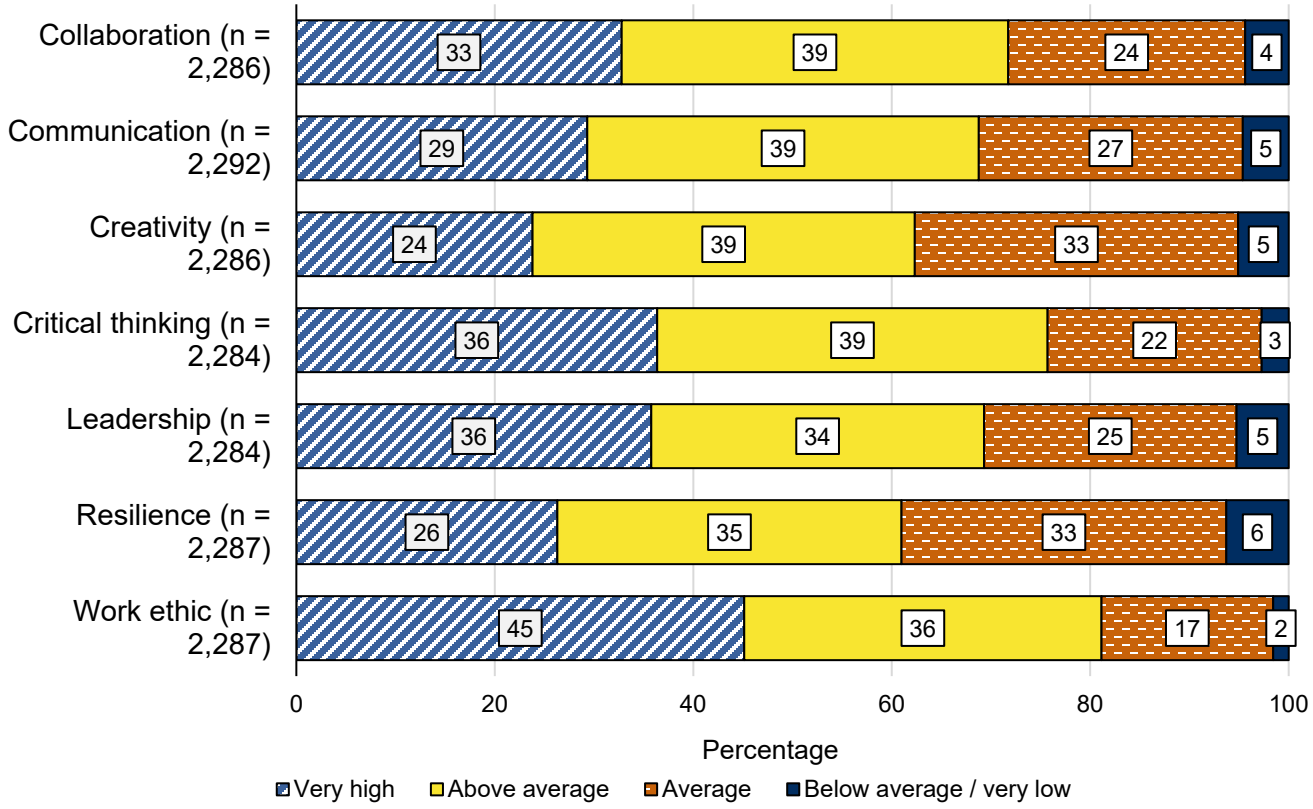
High School Students Report More Confidence in Some Durable Skills Than Others

Given that students consider durable skills important for career success, it is also highly relevant to understand how they rate their own proficiency in these skills. When asked to rate their own durable skill levels, most surveyed students reported that they were at least average across these skills, and many rated themselves above average or very high (Figure 2), although ratings varied by skill. Students rated work ethic as their strongest skill, with nearly half (45%) rating themselves very high and another 36% rating themselves above average. Critical thinking followed, with three quarters of students rating their skill level very high or above average.

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Students gave similar ratings for collaboration (72%) and leadership (70%). Approximately two thirds of students thought they had very high or above average skills in communication (68%), creativity (63%), and resilience (61%). On the other hand, more than one third of students rated themselves average or below in resilience (39%) and creativity (38%). Approximately one third had similar skill level ratings for communication (32%) and leadership (30%).

Figure 2. Percentages of Students Rating Their Levels of Durable Skills



Note. Percentages were calculated after weighting and might not add up to 100% due to rounding. The below average and very low categories were collapsed due to a low number of respondents selecting each.

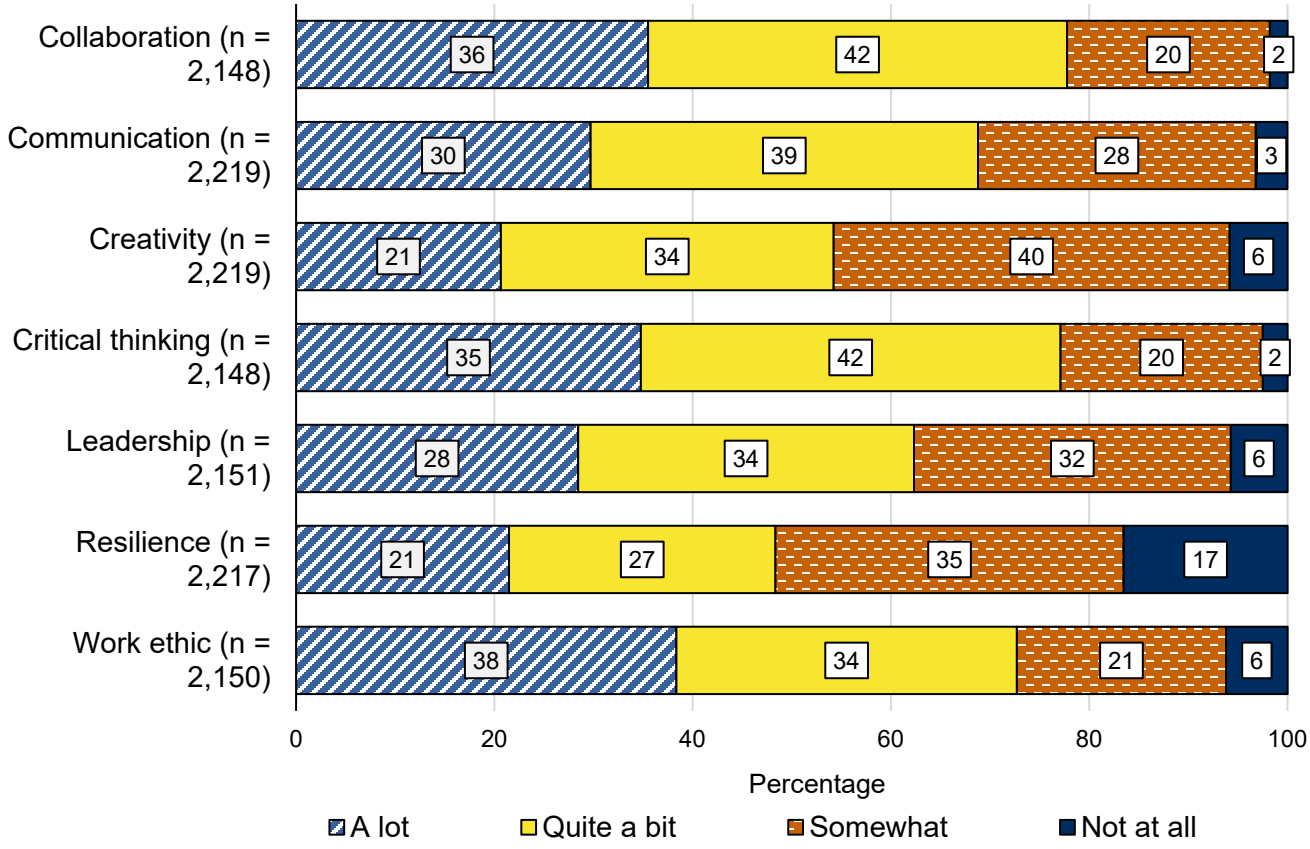
High School Students See Schools Teaching Durable Skills but Report Uneven Coverage

Students' confidence in their durable skills makes it important to understand how these skills are developed, especially the extent to which schools provide instruction that supports skill development. Most students reported that each durable skill was taught in school to at least some extent, although the extent of instruction varied by skill (Figure 3). Students most often reported that there was school-based instruction in collaboration (78%) and critical thinking (77%), rating these skills as being taught a lot or quite a bit. Work ethic was similarly rated by 72% of students, followed by communication at 69%. Smaller majorities reported that leadership

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(62%) and creativity (55%) were taught a lot or quite a bit, while slightly fewer than half reported the same about resilience (48%). Some other students indicated that creativity (40%) and resilience (35%) were taught only somewhat. About one third of students also said leadership was taught somewhat (32%), and slightly more than one quarter said the same about communication (28%). Notably, 17% of students reported that resilience was not taught at all, making this the highest untaught percentage among all the durable skills.

Figure 3. Percentages of Students Rating Extent to Which Durable Skills Are Taught in School



Note. Percentages were calculated after weighting and might not add up to 100% due to rounding.

We examined whether students' perceptions of the extent to which durable skills were taught in school were related to their durable skill level self-ratings. Correlations were positive but modest (ranging from .13 to .27; see Table A2 in the technical appendix for all correlations). In general, students who reported that a particular skill was taught more often in school also tended to rate themselves higher in that same skill (work ethic was the only exception). This pattern suggests that greater exposure to durable skill instruction may be associated with higher perceived skill levels, although the modest correlations indicate that other factors are also likely related to students' self-ratings.

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Discussion

In this study, we focused on high school students' perceptions related to durable skills, including 1) the skills' importance for career success, 2) students' self-rated skill levels, and 3) the extent to which these skills were taught in school. Findings indicate that 1) students recognize the importance of durable skills for career success, 2) often perceive themselves as proficient in these skills, and 3) see school instruction as uneven across skills, which highlights where schools can provide more intentional and consistent opportunities for durable skill development.

The top durable skills high school students identified as most important for their future careers were critical thinking, work ethic, communication, and collaboration. This is consistent with durable skills that college students and employers consider highly important for career readiness (Gray, 2025). High school students appear to understand what skills matter for career success, suggesting alignment between future workers' perceptions and workforce expectations.

The durable skills students considered most important were aligned overall with the skills in which they perceived themselves as more proficient. Many students rated their proficiency strongly in work ethic, critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership, with 70% to 81% rating themselves very high or above average in these skills. High school students' perceived strengths were similar to those that college students reported for comparable skills, although far fewer employers tended to rate recent graduates as highly proficient in many of these skills, with the exception of collaboration (Gray, 2025). This is reinforced by the *New Hire Readiness Report*, which reports that 84% of surveyed hiring managers believe that most high school graduates are unprepared to enter the workforce and can become more prepared by developing skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration (U.S. Chamber of Commerce & College Board, 2025).

At the same time, students' confidence varied across skills, suggesting that they consider themselves more prepared to demonstrate some durable skills than others. A large proportion of students (ranging from 32% to 39%) rated their proficiency in resilience, creativity, and communication as average or below. These results highlight skill areas where students would benefit from additional development, particularly because resilience and creativity were also among the skills students reported as being taught less extensively in school. About half of students (52% and 46% respectively) reported that these two skills were taught only somewhat or not at all in school.

Because students' skill level ratings are self-reported and may overestimate their actual proficiency (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Zell & Krizan, 2014), these ratings should be interpreted as students' subjective perceptions of their own readiness rather than as objective evidence of demonstrated proficiency. Students may have limited insight into their actual skill levels, particularly for behaviors that they have not performed frequently enough to evaluate accurately. As a result, overestimated self-ratings might capture confidence or aspiration rather than actual skill. Still, the results can provide a useful gauge of how students understand their current strengths and, when compared with objective measures, reveal areas for increasing students'

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awareness of discrepancies between their perceived and actual skill levels and the subsequent need for developing relevant durable skills.

Students reported that collaboration, critical thinking, work ethic, and communication were taught more often in schools than leadership, creativity, and resilience. Positive but modest correlations also indicated that students who reported more instruction in a given durable skill tended to rate themselves higher in that same skill. For example, about three quarters of students reported that critical thinking was taught a lot or quite a bit, and a similar proportion rated themselves very high or above average in critical thinking. By contrast, about half reported that resilience was taught somewhat or not at all, and only 61% rated themselves very high or above average in resilience. Although these findings are not causal, they suggest that greater exposure to instruction and practice may be associated with students' confidence in their durable skill levels. It is noteworthy that resilience had the highest percentage of students reporting that it was not taught at all. Given the importance of managing stress and adapting to setbacks, resilience warrants greater attention in school-based durable skill instruction.

Taken together, these findings indicate that schools may already be creating opportunities for students to build some durable skills, particularly collaboration, critical thinking, work ethic, and communication, but they provide less consistent opportunities for others, such as leadership, creativity, and resilience. These results reinforce the importance of schools providing more intentional and coherent approaches to durable skill development for all students. In a collaborative investigation with twelve diverse schools regarding how schools help students develop durable skills, Crawford and Unger (2026) found that effective durable skill development occurs when schools "make skills visible and trackable through frameworks that students engage with daily," create authentic opportunities for students to use these skills, and integrate skill development into the school experience "rather than treating it as an occasional add-on" (p. 31). Durable skill development can be amplified when these approaches involve scaffolded learning experiences, building and sustaining relationships that support risk-taking, and structured opportunities to learn, practice, reflect on, and apply durable skills in meaningful contexts (Crawford & Unger, 2026).

By helping students develop skills that are valued across workplaces and career pathways, schools can contribute to students' readiness for the durable skill expectations they will encounter in the workforce. Schools may want to consider taking the following actions, which are based on findings from this study and prior research on durable skill development:

- **Establish a schoolwide approach to durable skill development and build educator capacity.** Durable skill development is most effective when schools use a framework that defines key skills, provides a common language and expectations, and embeds skill development into student experiences and courses across grade levels (Mahoney et al., 2021). Schools can support implementation by providing teachers, counselors, and other school staff with professional development and collaborative planning opportunities; they can also offer examples of how durable skills can be integrated into existing instruction, school activities, and work-based learning rather than treated as a separate initiative. A coordinated and coherent schoolwide approach can help ensure that students encounter

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consistent language and expectations, have multiple opportunities to practice durable skills across a variety of subjects and settings, and receive reinforcement and feedback to ensure that skill development builds progressively over time.

- **Provide educators with durable skill assessment tools and instructional resources**. Counselors and teachers need reliable ways to assess students' durable skills, along with evidence-based resources that help students strengthen those skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021). Schools can expand access by partnering with districts, professional networks, or other schools to share vetted tools and instructional materials. Assessment tools should provide reliable and valid measures of durable skills as well as results that are clear, interpretable, and actionable for students and educators. Instructional materials should be developmentally appropriate and supported by evidence demonstrating their effectiveness in developing durable skills. Used together, assessment and instruction can help educators understand students' skill strengths and areas for growth and connect students with targeted resources that increase the likelihood of improvement.
- **Create opportunities for practice, feedback, reflection, and progress monitoring**. Durable skill development is more likely to be more effective when students have repeated opportunities to practice skills (Durlak et al., 2011), receive feedback, reflect on their performance (Wisniewski et al., 2020), and monitor their progress over time (Dent & Koenka, 2016). Teachers can support this process by supplementing their regular instruction with students' self-reflections after major assignments, peer feedback during group work, and portfolios that document evidence of students' progress in developing communication, collaboration, and other durable skills. Schools can also use multiple sources of evidence, such as student self-ratings, teacher observations, and portfolios, to identify students' strengths and areas for growth and to refine durable skill instruction.
- **Prioritize instruction in durable skills that receive less attention in school and that align with student needs.** Because students reported lower perceived skill levels in resilience and creativity and indicated that resilience, creativity, and leadership were taught less extensively than other skills, schools can intentionally expand opportunities for students to practice these skills throughout the curriculum. For example, students can build leadership skills by facilitating discussions, managing group projects, or being a group spokesperson. They can strengthen resilience by practicing stress-management strategies before exams or other potentially stress-inducing events or by using scenarios to learn how to adapt when situations do not go as planned. They can exercise creativity by brainstorming multiple solutions to real-world problems in relevant classroom activities. In addition, schools can consider flexible modular instructional approaches to building a range of durable skills depending on where students need additional support. For example, schools can offer a menu of durable skill–building mini modules that combine online learning with applied practice activities, allowing students to select modules aligned with their needs as part of regular instruction.

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- **Use career pathways to show how durable skills are applied.** Although durable skills are important across jobs and industries, the specific ways these skills are used can vary by career pathway. Counselors, teachers, and career advisors can help students connect durable skills to their planned occupations by showing how skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are applied in different fields. For example, students might examine job postings, interview workers, or compare workplace scenarios to see how durable skills support work tasks in their careers of interest. Making these connections can help students better understand the relevance of durable skills to their future careers and more easily grasp employer expectations, which may motivate them to strengthen these skills before graduating from high school.

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Technical Appendix

This study was part of a larger survey project focusing on students' perspectives on job skills. This issue brief summarizes the findings related to seven durable skills; these findings include information about 1) the durable skills students considered most important to have in order to do well in their planned occupations, 2) students' self-rated skill levels, and 3) the extent to which these durable skills were taught in school.

Sample

The target population was high school students in Grades 11 and 12 who registered for the December 2024 or February 2025 ACT national test and reported that they were residing in the U.S. It excluded students who did not provide a planned occupation or reported they were undecided on their planned occupation when registering for the ACT, so it may not fully represent the broader high school population. The sampled population was N = 121,539 and did not include students who opted out of ACT communications or who were included in recent student survey samples. A stratified random sample of 96,260 Grade 11 and Grade 12 high school students nationwide was drawn from the sampled population for this study. These students were presumed to be college-bound, although it is possible that some of them will not attend college. The sample was stratified on race/ethnicity.

Students were invited via email to participate in the online survey. The survey opened on February 12th, 2025, and closed on March 28th, 2025. A total of 2,294 students answered at least half of the required questions (i.e., the selected-response questions). This group was used as the analytical sample of the survey (a response rate of 2%). This response rate is not unusual for online surveys, and we do not know whether nonrespondents' opinions would have been similar to those of the respondents, which is a limitation of this study.

We used propensity weighting to weight the responses to match the sampled population, compensating for the differences in sample size and the overrepresentation of respondents from subgroups. Readers should be cautious about generalizing the results of this study, because the college-bound high school students in the sampled population could be high achieving and not represent the full range of achievement in the population.

Student characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, family income, parental education, high school GPA) are reported in Table A1 for the survey's sampled population, the analytical sample, and the weighted analytical sample. All the characteristics in the table were reported by students and were collected when the students registered for the ACT. Students who chose to participate in the survey were also asked to provide additional information about family income at the end of the survey.

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Table A1. Characteristics of the Sampled Population, Analytical Sample, and Weighted Analytical Sample (Percentage [a])

Characteristic	Group	Sampled population (*N* = 121,539)	Analytical sample (*n* = 2,294)	Weighted analytical sample (*n* = 2,294)
Gender	Female	59	67	58
	Male	40	31	40
	Other/unknown	1	2	2
Race/ethnicity	Asian	7	9	7
	Black / African American	15	10	14
	Hispanic/Latinx	15	13	14
	Other [b]	6	5	6
	White	53	59	54
	Race/ethnicity missing	3	4	4
Family income	Less than $36,000	20	12	10
	$36,000 to $100,000	22	30	23
	More than $100,000	39	53	39
	Family income missing	28	5	29
Parental education [c]	No college	13	9	14
	Some college	15	15	15
	College or higher	60	66	60
	Parental education missing	12	9	12
High school GPA	3.5 and above	64	76	66
	2.5–3.4	21	13	21
	2.4 and below	2	1	2
	HSGPA missing	13	10	12

[a] Some percentages in the table do not add up to 100% due to rounding. [b] Other races/ethnicities include Native American, Native Hawaiian / other Pacific Islander, and two or more races/ethnicities. [c] Parental education levels: no college = less than high school or high school graduate / GED; some college = business/technical school, certificate program, some college with no degree or certificate, or associate's degree (2 year); college or higher = bachelor's degree (4 year) or higher.

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Table A2. Correlations Between Students' Perceptions of Durable Skills Taught in School (Rows) and Durable Skill Level Self-Ratings (Columns) [a]

Skill taught	Resilience	Creativity	Communication	Critical thinking	Leadership	Work ethic	Collaboration
Resilience	.27	.08	.10	.09	.18	.04	.17
Creativity	.09	.24	.10	.07	.08	.05	.18
Communication	.17	.17	.19	.17	.14	.13	.21
Critical thinking	.14	.12	.12	.18	.08	.15	.16
Leadership	.11	.14	.15	.13	.22	.14	.18
Work ethic	.04	.10	.00	.07	.05	.13	.14
Collaboration	.09	.11	.13	.13	.12	.13	.22

[a] There were four response options indicating the degree to which skills were taught in school: a lot = 3, quite a bit = 2, somewhat = 1, and not at all = 0. There were five response options indicating students' self-ratings: very high = 4, above average = 3, average = 2, below average = 1, and very low = 0.

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Survey Instrument

The following are the relevant survey items for this issue brief:

1. How would you rate your skill level in each of the following skill areas? (Scale: Very High, Above Average, Average, Below Average, Very Low)

    - Resilience (e.g., manage stress effectively and identify and manage emotions)
    - Creativity (e.g., generate new ideas, adapt easily to new situations, and be open to new ideas)
    - Communication (e.g., listen attentively, write clearly, and share thoughts in an organized way)
    - Critical Thinking (e.g., analyze information logically, identify and solve problems, and summarize and interpret data accurately)
    - Leadership (e.g., plan, initiate, manage, complete, and evaluate projects; motivate and inspire others)
    - Professionalism (e.g., be on time, demonstrate dependability, and meet or exceed goals and expectations)
    - Teamwork (e.g., collaborate with others, build positive relationships, and provide empathy and help others)

2. To what extent do you think skills in each of the following areas are **taught in your school**? (Scale: A lot, Quite a bit, Somewhat, Not at all)

    - Resilience (e.g., manage stress effectively and identify and manage emotions)
    - Creativity (e.g., generate new ideas, adapt easily to new situations, and be open to new ideas)
    - Communication (e.g., listen attentively, write clearly, and share thoughts in an organized way)
    - Critical Thinking (e.g., analyze information logically, identify and solve problems, and summarize and interpret data accurately)
    - Leadership (e.g., plan, initiate, manage, complete, and evaluate projects; motivate and inspire others)
    - Professionalism (e.g., be on time, demonstrate dependability, and meet or exceed goals and expectations)
    - Teamwork (e.g., collaborate with others, build positive relationships, and provide empathy and help others)

3. Which of the following skill areas will be most important for you to do well in your future planned occupation? Select all that apply. (Note: the original question included other skill areas. The following were the specific focus of this brief. Check out the full report (insert link) for the entire skill list)

    ☐ Resilience (e.g., manage stress effectively and identify and manage emotions)

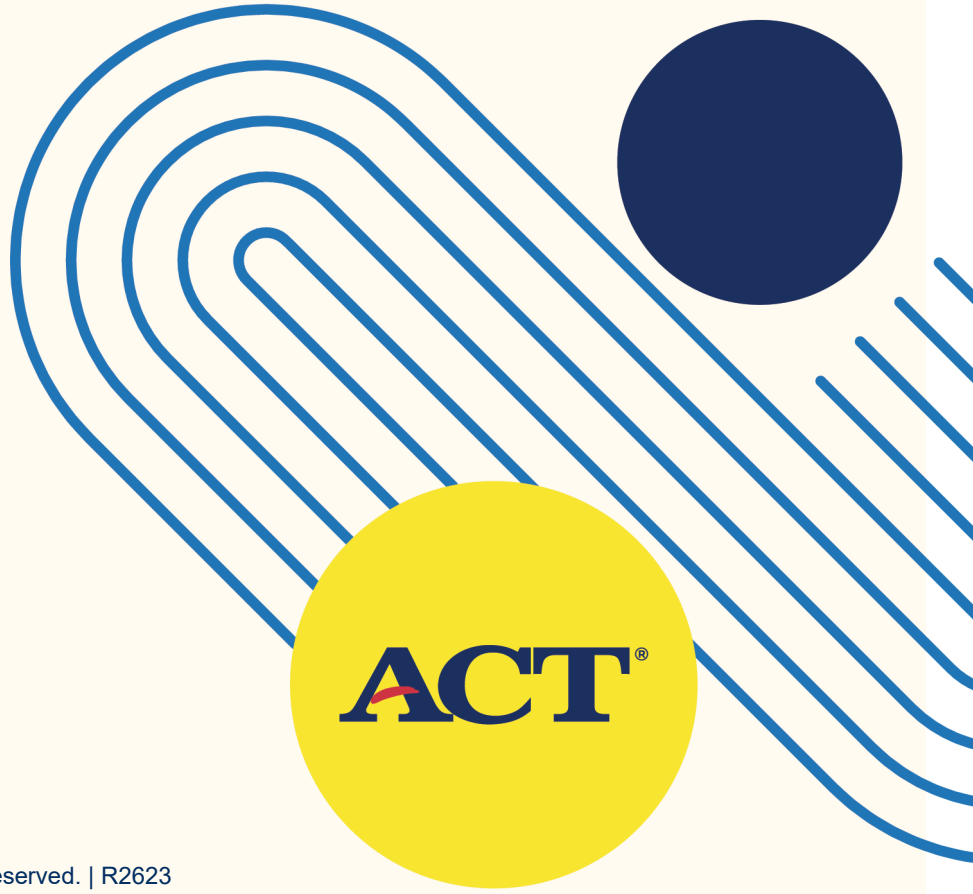
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- ☐ Creativity (e.g., generate new ideas, adapt easily to new situations, and be open to new ideas)
- ☐ Communication (e.g., listen attentively, write clearly, and share thoughts in an organized way)
- ☐ Critical Thinking (e.g., analyze information logically, identify and solve problems, and summarize and interpret data accurately)
- ☐ Leadership (e.g., plan, initiate, manage, complete, and evaluate projects; motivate and inspire others)
- ☐ Professionalism (e.g., be on time, demonstrate dependability, and meet or exceed goals and expectations)
- ☐ Teamwork (e.g., collaborate with others, build positive relationships, and provide empathy and help others)

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