

# READY Institute at USG: Employer Focus Group Highlights

## Business Enterprise (BE) +

## Public Service, Education, & Social Sciences (PSESS) Sectors

October 23, 2025

### Purpose

- Preview v3 of the READY Education-to-Employment Dashboards, including new additions: employment outcomes for USG alumni, organized by industry sector.
- Gather employer insights on emerging workforce needs and implications for learners.
- Connect employer perspectives with regional education and economic development partners.

### Employer Participants

- John Clarke, USG Board of Advisors
- Alyssa Tucker and Kelliann Quinn (Rose Financial)
- Greg Wilson (Cohn Reznick)
- Dr. Hank Boyd, Robert H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland
- Verelyn Gibbs Watson, Nothing Bundt Cakes
- Stephanie Helsing, Greater Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce
- Joe Trubiano, Stanley Martin Homes
- Meredith Benning, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)

### Partner Organization Participants

- Sasha Scott, Economic Development Specialist, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC)
- Scott J. Riley II, PhD, Instructor & M.S. (Master of Science degree program) Internship Coordinator for the UMB (University of Maryland Baltimore) Pharmaceutical Sciences program at USG

### Executive Summary

The Fall 2025 Employer Focus Group sessions convened leaders from the Business Enterprise (BE) and Public Service, Education, and Social Sciences (PSESS) sectors to share perspectives on evolving workforce needs, data-informed decision-making, and the role of higher education in shaping adaptable, career-ready graduates. Employers praised USG's Education-to-Employment Dashboards for their clarity and the inclusion of alumni outcome data. Participants across both sectors emphasized the growing importance of data literacy, ethical awareness, and applied learning experiences. The session reaffirmed USG's position as a regional connector linking academic preparation with workforce innovation.

*Key Themes & Insights on pp. 2-3*



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BE + PSESS Sectors - October 23, 2025

## Cross-Cutting Themes & Insights

### Feedback on Education-to-Employment Dashboards

Employers from both sectors expressed appreciation for the accessible and visually clear presentation of alumni employment outcomes. Greg Wilson (Cohn Reznick) observed that 'the ability to see where graduates actually end up helps us tailor internship recruitment and identify where skill development aligns with employer demand.' Meredith Benning (MCPS) noted that the dashboards offer 'an invaluable snapshot of regional workforce gaps,' suggesting they could support ongoing curriculum alignment.

### The Role of Technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

As the discussion shifted toward technology and AI, employers reflected on the increasing need for graduates to combine technical literacy with ethical awareness. Greg Wilson emphasized that 'AI isn't replacing accountants, but it's changing what accountants do—students need to understand how to work alongside data systems and automation.' PSESS participants highlighted the growing role of AI in data analysis, ethics, and educational decision-making, calling for training that integrates technology fluency with human-centered judgment.

### Workforce Preparation and Skills Development

Both sectors commended USG graduates for their professionalism and adaptability. BE employers emphasized the need for critical thinking, communication, and cross-functional project experience. Greg Wilson remarked that 'graduates who can synthesize business context with technology insight are the ones who stand out.' PSESS participants, such as Meredith Benning, underscored the value of leadership and exposure to community-based learning, suggesting these experiences nurture empathy and readiness for public service roles.

### Strengthening University Partnerships

Employers across both sectors expressed interest in building deeper, sustained partnerships with USG. Sasha Scott (MCEDC) noted that 'USG's convening power is one of its strongest assets—it creates bridges that help the county's economic ecosystem thrive.' Multiple participants encouraged the READY Institute to expand its mentorship and internship pipelines, aligning academic preparation with real-world practice. Dr. Ruiz's preview of the experiential learning metrics resonated strongly as evidence of measurable progress.

*Sector-Specific Employer Insights on p. 3*



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## Key Sector-Specific Employer Insights

### Business Enterprise

- Employers value dashboard data for aligning recruitment with workforce needs.
- AI and automation are reshaping job expectations; graduates must be adaptable and data-fluent.
- Communication and analytical skills remain essential alongside technical expertise.
- Companies like Cohn Reznick and Rose Financial stressed the importance of applied learning and internship readiness.

### Public Service, Education, and Social Sciences

- Emphasis on ethical, data-informed decision-making in education and social services.
- AI literacy, framed through public responsibility and community impact.
- Support for experiential, community-based learning opportunities.
- Recognition of USG's role in connecting institutions with public-sector partners like MCPS and MCEDC.

## Acknowledgments

The READY Institute at the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) extends its appreciation to all employers and institutional partners who contributed to the Fall 2025 Employer Focus Group Series.

Special thanks to our employer participants as well as the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) for your close collaboration.

USG participants included co-moderators Dr. Dave Buonara and Dr. Rudy Ruiz, Chief Strategy Officer Mary Lang, Tom Clifford, Deb Zimmer, Sandy Brooks, and Rose Jackson-Speiser.



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# READY Institute at USG: Employer Focus Group Highlights

## Health & Life Sciences Sector - October 6, 2025

### Purpose

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- Gather employer insights on emerging workforce needs and implications for learners.
- Connect employer perspectives with regional education and economic development partners.

### Employer Participants

- Amanda Cowley, Chief Growth Officer, US Pharmacopeia (USP)
- Kerstin Haskell, President, World BioHazTec (WBHT)
- Tracey Ann Brown, Training Manager, WBHT
- Todd Cohen, Senior Manager of Strategic Workforce Development, Lockheed Martin

### Partner Organization Participants

- Gabriella Ryan, Ph.D., Economic Development Specialist for Life Sciences, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC)
- Shawn Krasa, Work-Based Learning Manager, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)
- Scott J. Riley II, PhD, Instructor & M.S. (Master of Science degree program) Internship Coordinator for the UMB (University of Maryland Baltimore) Pharmaceutical Sciences program at USG

### Key Themes from Employers

#### Talent Readiness: Beyond Degrees

Degrees remain key, but real-world application and teamwork increasingly shape hiring.

- “Degrees are still a key signal for us. And I could see a world where a sufficient set of relevant certifications and experiences could be a valuable, viable alternative.” -Amanda Cowley, USP
- WBHT highlighted the importance of showcasing experiential learning, suggesting digital badging could validate career-connected experiences.

#### Employer Use of Data & Dashboards

- Smaller firms viewed graduates’ salary income data by sector as ‘very helpful’ to benchmark competitiveness
- Employers and MCEDC endorsed adding experiential learning data (e.g., internships, apprenticeships) to help match talent pipelines with company needs
- Dr. Ryan emphasized the value of such data to help current and prospective employers leverage County and State tax credits, especially for large-scale hiring initiatives

*continued on p. 2 of 2*



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# READY Institute at USG: Employer Focus Group Highlights

## Health & Life Sciences Sector - October 6, 2025

### Key Themes from Employers, cont.

#### AI Integration in Daily Workflows

Employers are taking incremental steps toward AI adoption, prioritizing team members' proficiency and efficiency through embedded tools in existing platforms.

- “Using AI for report writing and email management is a good start - but you still need to check your work, drawing on a strong understanding of your industry standards.” -Kerstin Haskell, WBHT
- Cowley noted an increasing demand for data-literate, adaptable professionals who can use AI responsibly.

#### Soft Skills and Learning Agility

Kerstin Haskell remarked that, “USG graduates are way ahead” in soft skills - particularly teamwork, communication, and professionalism - qualities that complement technical expertise.

#### Pathways and Continuing Education

- MCPS outlined plans to launch a biotech apprenticeship pathway, initially building from the high school level to Montgomery College, aligned with the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.
- USP and WBHT both expressed interest in partnering with USG to offer continuing education and upskilling for their current workforce.

### Next Steps

- Integrate employer feedback into dashboard (v3) refinements.
- Continue sector-specific conversations through Fall focus groups (Public Service, Education, and Social Sciences (PSESS) and Business Enterprise on 10/23).
- Share highlights and refined dashboards with County officials and broader stakeholders by Nov. 28.

### Hosted by USG

#### Participating Staff

- Moderated by the Office of Strategic Partnerships: Chief Strategy Officer Mary Lang; Director Joyce Fuhrmann; Dr. Dave Buonora & Tom Clifford, Employer Partnerships; Dr. Rudy Ruiz, READY Institute; Deborah Zimmer, Manager, Employer Relations; Data Analyst Cheryl Green, MBA; Statistical Data Assistant Lulua Shahmalak
- Sandy Brooks, Program Manager, Strategic Plan Administration, Office of the Executive Director
- Health & Life Sciences Sector Hub Co-Chair Annie Foster Ahmed, Ed.M., Director of the John and Effie Macklin Center for Academic and Leadership Success

*p. 2 of 2*



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# READY Institute at USG: Employer Focus Group Highlights

Health & Life Sciences Sector - October 6, 2025

## Purpose

- Preview v3 of the READY Education-to-Employment Dashboards, including new additions: employment outcomes for USG alumni, organized by industry sector.
- Gather employer insights on emerging workforce needs and implications for learners.

## Partner Organization Participants

- Gabriella Ryan, Ph.D., Economic Development Specialist for Life Sciences, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC)
- Shawn Krasa, Work-Based Learning Manager, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)
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## Key Themes from Employers

### Evolving Signals for Talent Readiness

Employers affirmed that degrees remain key hiring indicators but are increasingly complemented by experiential and skill-based evidence:

- “Obviously we look at degrees first, but the next big thing is candidates’ having worked with employers while earning that degree.” Kerstin Haskell, President of World BioHazTec (WBHT)
- “One of the first experiences we look for in a candidate’s history is in-person teamwork - for us, particularly in a lab setting.” -Amanda Cowley, Chief Growth Officer, US Pharmacopeia (USP)

### Value of Career-Connected Learning

Employers expressed strong support for expanding dashboard data to include students’ experiential learning and work-based learning opportunities. Dr. Ryan (MCEDC) and Dr. Riley (UMB at USG) noted this would strengthen employer alignment and connect workforce incentives, including Maryland’s hiring tax credits for growing employers, including life sciences firms.

### Shifts in AI Utilization

Participants noted that smaller and mid-sized firms are integrating AI within existing platforms (e.g., Salesforce, Microsoft), rather than focusing on resource-intensive efforts to develop proprietary systems.

### Continued Learning and Upskilling

Employers emphasized support for lifelong learning and credentials. Both WBHT and USP expressed interest in partnering with USG to enable existing employees to upskill and earn new certifications and degrees.

## Next Steps

- Integrate employer feedback into dashboard refinements.
- Continue sector-specific conversations through Fall focus groups (Public Service, Education, and Social Sciences (PSESS) and Business Enterprise on 10/23).
- Share highlights and refined dashboards with County officials and broader stakeholders by Nov. 28.



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# READY Institute at USG: Employer Focus Group Highlights

## Engineering & Technology Sector - September 26, 2025

### Purpose

- Preview v3 of the READY Education-to-Employment Dashboards, including new additions: employment outcomes for USG alumni, organized by industry sector.
- Gather employer insights on emerging workforce needs and implications for learners.
- Share external perspectives, incl. highlights from Google Cloud's "The ROI of AI 2025" report.

### Key Themes from Employers

#### AI Uncertainty + Opportunity

Employers affirmed uncertainties around AI adoption, while emphasizing the importance of learners gaining:

- Domain-specific expertise
- Business acumen within a sector
- Adaptability in applying AI-powered tools to optimize workflows

#### Skills Balance

Employers underscored that success depends on blending technical expertise with communication, teamwork, and project management skills.

#### Experiential Learning

Strong interest in collaboration with USG to provide learners with realistic organizational case studies to demonstrate applied skills (e.g., AI tool deployment, project leadership).

### Employer Perspectives

- "The basics of "WHAT" we need as a functioning human society (*food, shelter, healthcare etc.*) will not change. The same can be said for an operating business (*HR, product development/delivery, customer services, etc.*). These are the basic needs of an operating business. But the "HOW" we execute or provide what's needed will. So, while AI will certainly and (increasingly) continue to be used to optimize and create efficiencies around what is needed, employers still need human talent with the knowledge of industry domains, to apply their creativity and critical thinking to build those efficient workflows (and correct errors)." – Christine Sanni, CEO, Sybal
- "Our sector needs graduates who not only have technical skills but can also work across teams and bring business and situational awareness to their roles." – Todd Cohen, Lockheed Martin

**Regional Partner Participation:** Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC)

### Next Steps

- Integrate employer feedback into dashboard refinements.
- Continue sector-specific conversations through Fall focus groups (Health & Life Sciences on 10/6; Public Service, Education, and Social Sciences (PSESS) and Business Enterprise on 10/23).
- Share highlights and refined dashboards with County officials and broader stakeholders by Nov. 28.



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