Career-connected learning, AI readiness, and workforce mobility: Empirical implications for the California State University Bachelor of Professional Studies

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Abstract

Higher education is increasingly challenged by workforce disruption, artificial intelligence (AI), graduate underemployment, and growing demand for flexible educational pathways serving adult and nontraditional learners. In response to these workforce conditions, the California State University (CSU) system recently introduced the proposed Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS), an interdisciplinary workforce-oriented degree designed to support adult learners through applied learning, prior learning assessment, and career-connected education. This study examines empirical evidence from Riipen workforce-learning analytics and large-scale experiential learning ecosystems to evaluate the effectiveness of workforce-integrated professional studies models. Findings indicate that career-connected learning significantly improves employability, durable skill development, career confidence, AI readiness, and workforce adaptability while expanding access for underrepresented and adult learner populations. The study further demonstrates the scalability of curriculum-embedded experiential learning infrastructures and employer-engaged project ecosystems. Collectively, the findings suggest that the CSU BPS may serve as a transformative model for workforce-integrated, AI-aware, and competency-driven public higher education by strengthening adult learner success, workforce mobility, and future-ready educational innovation across the CSU system.

Keywords: Career-connected learning; workforce mobility; AI readiness; adult learners; experiential learning; CSU; Bachelor of Professional Studies; work-integrated learning; employability; durable skills

Introduction

The Changing Nature of Higher Education

Higher education is undergoing significant transformation as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital technologies reshape labor markets and workforce expectations. Employers increasingly prioritize adaptable, technologically literate, and problem-solving professionals capable of navigating rapidly evolving work environments. The World Economic Forum (2025) projected that AI and automation will substantially alter workforce structures, increasing demand for analytical thinking, collaboration, resilience, and lifelong learning competencies. At the same time, graduate underemployment continues to intensify, with nearly half of college graduates remaining underemployed years after graduation due to limited applied experience and workforce competencies (Burning Glass Institute & Strada Institute, 2024).

These developments have accelerated a shift from traditional credential-based education toward competency-based and workforce-integrated learning models. Employers increasingly seek evidence of practical skills, portfolios, and demonstrated workplace competencies rather than

academic credentials alone (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024). Research further indicates that experiential and career-connected learning significantly improves employability, career confidence, and workforce readiness among college students (Gallup, 2014; Strada Education Network, 2023). Consequently, institutions of higher education face increasing pressure to redesign curricula that align academic learning with workforce application, digital fluency, and AI-era professional demands.

The Adult Learner Imperative

These workforce transformations are especially significant for adult, returning, military-connected, and working learners. Adult learners now comprise a substantial portion of postsecondary enrollments and frequently balance employment, family responsibilities, military service, and professional obligations while pursuing degrees (Lumina Foundation & Gallup, 2024). Traditional undergraduate models often fail to accommodate these realities. Rigid scheduling, limited recognition of professional experience, and insufficient workforce integration continue to create barriers to degree completion and economic mobility.

In response, public universities increasingly seek flexible, workforce-aligned pathways that recognize experiential learning, military training, industry certifications, and applied competencies. Career-connected learning ecosystems—including project-based learning, work-integrated learning, micro-internships, and employer-engaged educational models—offer scalable approaches for supporting adult learners while strengthening workforce relevance (Riipen, 2026). Such models are particularly important in the AI era, where continuous reskilling, adaptability, and digital competencies are essential for long-term employability.

CSU System Context

The California State University (CSU) system recently approved development of the Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) to expand access, flexibility, workforce alignment, and degree completion opportunities for adult and nontraditional learners. The proposed BPS aligns with CSU priorities emphasizing workforce mobility, applied learning, economic development, and equitable educational access. The framework integrates interdisciplinary workforce preparation with prior learning assessment, experiential learning, AI and digital literacy, leadership development, and applied professional practice.

The BPS is designed as a future-oriented workforce degree for adult learners whose educational pathways include professional experience, military service, technical certifications, apprenticeships, and industry-based learning. By integrating career-connected learning into academic programming, the proposed BPS seeks to bridge persistent gaps between higher education and employment while strengthening workforce readiness across emerging AI-enhanced industries. The initiative also reflects broader national trends emphasizing durable skills, competency validation, and employer-engaged educational ecosystems as central components of higher education reform.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines empirical evidence from large-scale career-connected learning ecosystems to evaluate the effectiveness of workforce-integrated professional studies models for the California State University system. Specifically, the study explores how experiential learning infrastructures, employer-engaged project models, and AI-oriented workforce competencies may inform implementation and future development of the CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies.

Research Questions

1. What empirical evidence supports career-connected learning as a workforce readiness strategy?
2. How do experiential learning ecosystems contribute to employability and durable skill development?
3. What implications do these findings hold for the CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies initiative?
4. How might AI-era workforce trends reshape professional studies education?

Literature Review

Adult Learning and Workforce Education

Adult learning theory has long emphasized learner autonomy, experiential knowledge, and practical application in higher education. Knowles's theory of andragogy remains foundational in understanding adult learners as self-directed individuals who bring substantial personal and professional experiences into educational environments (Knowles et al., 2020). Unlike traditional pedagogical models designed primarily for younger students, andragogical approaches emphasize relevance, problem-centered learning, and immediate application of knowledge to real-world contexts. These principles have become increasingly important as colleges and universities enroll growing populations of returning, military-connected, and working adult learners seeking career advancement and workforce mobility.

Contemporary workforce education literature further highlights the importance of lifelong learning in rapidly changing labor markets. Technological disruption, automation, and digital transformation have intensified the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling throughout adult careers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). Adult learners increasingly pursue flexible degree pathways that recognize prior learning, professional competencies, military experience, and industry certifications as legitimate forms of academic preparation. Research further demonstrates that adult degree-completion programs emphasizing flexibility, workforce alignment, and experiential learning significantly improve persistence, employability, and economic mobility among nontraditional students (CAEL, 2024).

Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning

Experiential learning theory provides an important framework for understanding workforce-integrated education. Kolb's experiential learning model conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015). Within higher education, experiential and work-integrated

learning increasingly connect classroom instruction to authentic workplace applications through internships, project-based learning, employer-engaged assignments, and professional simulations.

Research consistently demonstrates that work-based learning improves student engagement, career readiness, and workforce confidence. High-impact experiential learning opportunities allow students to apply disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously developing durable skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and professional adaptability (Jackson, 2023). Scaffolding theory further supports integrating progressively complex professional experiences throughout academic programs rather than relying solely on isolated late-stage internships. Scaffolded experiential learning ecosystems provide repeated exposure to workplace expectations, enabling learners to build vocational identity, professional confidence, and transferable competencies incrementally (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO], 2023).

In response to employer demand and labor-market volatility, universities increasingly adopt curriculum-embedded experiential learning models that integrate employer partnerships directly into coursework. These approaches move beyond traditional internship structures toward scalable project-based infrastructures capable of serving broader student populations, including adult and part-time learners who may face barriers to conventional internships.

Career Readiness and Durable Skills

Career readiness has emerged as a central concern in higher education policy and workforce development discourse. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2024) identifies communication, teamwork, critical thinking, professionalism, leadership, technology fluency, and career self-development as essential workforce competencies for college graduates. However, growing evidence suggests substantial disconnects between employer expectations and graduate preparedness. Employers frequently report that graduates lack practical workplace skills necessary for immediate professional success despite possessing academic credentials (Cengage Group, 2025).

Durable skills—sometimes referred to as transferable or human skills—have become increasingly valuable in AI-enhanced labor markets because they remain resistant to automation. Communication, ethical decision-making, collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities are widely recognized as essential competencies across professional sectors (World Economic Forum, 2025). Studies further indicate that students participating in career-connected learning programs report higher levels of workforce confidence, career clarity, and employability than peers who experience primarily classroom-based instruction (Strada Education Foundation, 2024). Consequently, institutions increasingly seek scalable educational models that integrate academic learning with workforce preparation.

AI and the Future of Work

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping workforce structures, professional expectations, and educational priorities. Automation technologies continue transforming both technical and

knowledge-based professions, requiring workers to develop interdisciplinary competencies that combine technological fluency with human-centered problem-solving skills (McKinsey Global Institute, 2024). AI-enhanced professions increasingly demand workers who can interpret data, collaborate across disciplines, evaluate ethical implications of technology, and adapt to evolving digital ecosystems.

The emergence of AI-driven economies has intensified calls for workforce-oriented educational reform. Scholars argue that higher education must move beyond static disciplinary models toward adaptive, competency-based frameworks emphasizing digital literacy, critical inquiry, and lifelong learning (Luckin & Cukurova, 2024). Educational institutions therefore face increasing pressure to integrate AI readiness and applied digital competencies across professional curricula rather than limiting such instruction to technical disciplines alone.

Career-Connected Learning Models

Career-connected learning models have emerged as scalable solutions for bridging gaps between education and employment. Employer-engaged ecosystems integrate authentic workplace projects, industry collaboration, micro-internships, and project-based coursework directly into academic pathways. These models provide students with opportunities to demonstrate workforce competencies while enabling employers to participate actively in talent development (Riipen, 2026).

Recent innovations in experiential learning infrastructure emphasize scalable digital platforms capable of supporting thousands of learners simultaneously through project-based workforce engagement. Such models expand access to work-integrated learning beyond traditionally privileged student populations while strengthening institutional workforce alignment initiatives. Emerging evidence further suggests that career-connected learning ecosystems substantially improve career readiness, employability, and workforce adaptability among adult and nontraditional learners.

Gap in the Literature

Despite expanding scholarship on experiential learning and workforce education, important gaps remain in the literature. Limited research examines scalable adult-oriented professional studies models within large public university systems. Additionally, empirical studies rarely integrate AI readiness, experiential learning, workforce mobility, and adult education into unified professional studies frameworks.

As public universities increasingly confront AI-driven workforce transformation and growing adult learner populations, additional research is needed to examine how interdisciplinary, workforce-integrated degree models may support employability, career mobility, and lifelong learning in the digital era.

CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies Framework

Historical and Institutional Context

Professional studies education has historically occupied an important role within public higher education systems seeking to balance academic rigor with workforce relevance. Within the California State University (CSU) system, applied and workforce-oriented educational models have long supported regional economic development, career mobility, teacher preparation, technical education, and adult degree-completion initiatives. Professional studies programs traditionally emerged as interdisciplinary structures designed to serve working adults, military-connected learners, career changers, and technical professionals whose educational and occupational experiences extended beyond conventional academic pathways (California State University [CSU], 2025).

The historical evolution of professional studies within CSU reflects broader national shifts toward workforce-integrated education and lifelong learning. Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, CSU campuses expanded programs emphasizing applied leadership, workforce development, organizational studies, continuing education, and interdisciplinary professional practice. These initiatives frequently aligned with California's economic priorities by supporting industries such as healthcare, education, logistics, public administration, business, and technical trades (Bohn et al., 2024). Simultaneously, adult education scholarship increasingly emphasized flexible educational pathways capable of recognizing experiential learning, workforce competencies, and prior professional achievement as legitimate forms of academic preparation.

The relationship between professional studies and adult education is especially significant in workforce environments shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital transformation. Adult learners increasingly require educational models integrating lifelong learning, career adaptability, technological fluency, and workforce mobility. Consequently, the proposed CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) reflects both a continuation of workforce-oriented educational traditions and a modernization of professional studies frameworks for the AI era.

Structure of the Proposed BPS

The proposed Bachelor of Professional Studies is designed as a flexible, interdisciplinary undergraduate degree emphasizing workforce integration, competency development, and applied professional learning. Unlike narrowly specialized disciplinary programs, the BPS framework recognizes diverse forms of professional preparation, including workforce experience, military service, technical certifications, apprenticeships, corporate training, and community-based learning. Central to the model is the incorporation of prior learning assessment (PLA) and credit for prior learning (CPL), allowing students to receive academic recognition for validated experiential competencies (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2024).

PLA/CPL frameworks have become increasingly important in adult degree-completion programs because they reduce barriers to graduation while validating workforce-acquired knowledge. Research indicates that adult learners receiving prior learning credit demonstrate improved persistence and degree completion outcomes compared to students without such opportunities (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2023). Within the proposed BPS model, PLA/CPL serves not merely as

an administrative accommodation but also as institutional recognition of professional expertise and experiential knowledge.

The curriculum further emphasizes workforce competency validation through interdisciplinary coursework integrating leadership, communication, AI literacy, organizational systems, ethics, research literacy, and applied professional practice. The proposed model positions workforce competencies as measurable educational outcomes aligned with employer expectations regarding adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, and digital fluency (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024). Importantly, AI and digital-era competencies are embedded throughout the curriculum rather than isolated within technical coursework alone. This approach reflects growing recognition that AI literacy and technological adaptability are increasingly essential across professional sectors (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Alignment with CSU Priorities

The proposed BPS aligns closely with CSU systemwide priorities emphasizing degree completion, workforce alignment, educational equity, and regional economic development. California continues to face workforce shortages across healthcare, education, public service, advanced manufacturing, logistics, and technology sectors. Simultaneously, millions of Californians possess some college experience but no completed degree, creating substantial opportunities for adult-oriented completion pathways (Public Policy Institute of California [PPIC], 2024).

The BPS directly addresses these challenges by creating flexible pathways for working adults, military-connected students, and nontraditional learners whose educational journeys may not align with conventional undergraduate structures. The program's workforce-integrated design further supports CSU efforts to strengthen economic mobility and expand access to underserved student populations. Career-connected learning, employer-engaged projects, and applied professional experiences provide mechanisms for aligning academic learning with regional labor-market demands while improving employability outcomes.

Military-connected learners represent another important population supported through the proposed BPS framework. California maintains one of the nation's largest veteran and active-duty populations, many of whom possess substantial technical and leadership expertise acquired through military training and service. PLA/CPL mechanisms embedded within the BPS model offer opportunities to translate military-acquired competencies into academic credit while facilitating smoother transitions into civilian careers and advanced workforce roles (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Proposed Competency Domains

The proposed BPS curriculum is organized around interdisciplinary competency domains designed to support workforce readiness and future-oriented professional development.

Foundations of Professional Studies

This domain emphasizes professional communication, research literacy, critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and adult learning principles. Foundational competencies prepare students to navigate complex organizational and professional environments while supporting lifelong learning and evidence-based practice.

AI and Digital Era Core

The AI and Digital Era Core integrates artificial intelligence literacy, digital technologies, data-informed decision-making, cyber ethics, and technology-enhanced professional practice. These competencies reflect the growing importance of digital fluency and technological adaptability within AI-enhanced labor markets.

Leadership and Organizational Systems

Leadership competencies focus on organizational behavior, strategic planning, collaboration, conflict resolution, innovation, and global organizational systems. Such skills are increasingly recognized as essential for workforce adaptability and interdisciplinary leadership in rapidly changing professional environments.

Workforce and Community Studies

This domain examines workforce systems, career pathways, globalization, public policy, community engagement, and social responsibility. Students explore the broader social, economic, and institutional contexts influencing professional practice and workforce mobility.

Applied Professional Practice

Applied professional learning includes project management, internships, field experiences, portfolio development, and experiential learning activities connecting academic learning to authentic workplace environments. These experiences strengthen workforce readiness while providing opportunities for competency validation and professional networking.

Capstone and Future-Ready Learning

The capstone domain synthesizes interdisciplinary learning through applied research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and future-oriented workforce problem-solving. These culminating experiences emphasize adaptability, leadership, and continuous professional growth in evolving digital economies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a secondary empirical research design utilizing descriptive and comparative workforce-learning analysis to examine the implications of career-connected learning ecosystems for the California State University (CSU) Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS)

initiative. Secondary empirical analysis is increasingly used in higher education and workforce research to evaluate large-scale educational trends, institutional outcomes, and labor-market developments through existing datasets and organizational reports (Johnston, 2023). Given the emerging nature of the CSU BPS framework and the limited availability of long-term institutional outcome data, secondary analysis provides an appropriate methodological approach for examining workforce-aligned educational models and experiential learning infrastructures.

The study also incorporated a policy-informed interpretive framework grounded in workforce development, adult education, and experiential learning literature. Policy-oriented educational research frequently combines quantitative indicators with interpretive analysis to evaluate how institutional innovations align with labor-market demands, public higher education priorities, and workforce mobility initiatives (Labaree, 2024). Within this context, the study examined empirical evidence related to employability, career readiness, durable skills, and AI-oriented workforce competencies within large-scale career-connected learning ecosystems.

The research design further reflected comparative workforce-learning analysis principles by examining patterns across multiple institutional and organizational contexts rather than focusing on a single program or institution. Comparative approaches are particularly useful for evaluating scalable educational infrastructures operating across diverse learner populations, workforce sectors, and regional economies (Tight, 2023). Consequently, the study synthesized findings from career-connected learning initiatives, workforce readiness reports, and higher education policy documents to identify recurring trends and implications relevant to the proposed CSU BPS model.

Data Sources

The primary data source for this study was the *Riipen 2025 Annual Impact Report*, which provided quantitative and qualitative data regarding career-connected learning experiences, employability outcomes, durable skill development, employer engagement, AI-related workforce competencies, and student participation patterns across large-scale experiential learning ecosystems (Riipen, 2026). The report included data from more than 300,000 completed learning experiences involving educational institutions, employers, adult learners, and workforce development initiatives throughout North America.

Additional data sources included institutional reports addressing career-connected learning implementation, experiential education, workforce-aligned curriculum models, and work-integrated learning initiatives within colleges and universities. Public workforce development reports and national employability studies further contributed contextual labor-market indicators and workforce readiness trends relevant to the BPS framework. These reports included analyses from organizations such as the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Strada Education Foundation, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The inclusion of public higher education workforce reports strengthened the study's ability to situate career-connected learning within broader discussions concerning workforce mobility, adult learner success, degree completion, and AI-era employability. Collectively, these sources

provided a multidimensional evidence base for examining workforce-integrated educational models and emerging professional competency frameworks.

Variables Examined

Several variables were examined to evaluate workforce-oriented educational outcomes associated with career-connected learning ecosystems. Employability outcomes included indicators such as job placement potential, professional networking opportunities, internship-to-employment transitions, and learner perceptions regarding workforce preparedness. Durable skill gains focused on competencies frequently identified by employers as essential in contemporary labor markets, including communication, teamwork, critical thinking, professionalism, adaptability, and problem-solving (NACE, 2024).

Employer satisfaction represented another important variable, particularly regarding organizational perceptions of student preparedness, workforce contributions, project quality, and collaborative value derived from experiential learning partnerships. AI-related skill development was examined through indicators measuring technological fluency, digital competency growth, AI-enhanced workforce preparation, and emerging interdisciplinary technical capabilities.

Additional variables included career confidence, workforce readiness indicators, and participation rates among underrepresented learner populations. Career confidence measures reflected students' self-reported clarity regarding career goals, professional identity, and workplace preparedness. Workforce readiness indicators included experiential learning participation, portfolio development, professional references, and evidence of applied workforce competencies. Participation among adult learners, first-generation students, military-connected learners, and historically underrepresented populations was also examined given CSU's equity and workforce mobility priorities.

Analytical Procedures

The study employed descriptive statistical interpretation to examine workforce-learning trends, participation patterns, employability indicators, and competency development outcomes reported across career-connected learning ecosystems. Descriptive analysis is particularly appropriate in educational workforce research when evaluating large-scale institutional and learner outcome patterns across multiple contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Quantitative findings were interpreted through workforce development and adult learning frameworks to identify implications for scalable professional studies education.

Cross-case comparative analysis was additionally used to examine recurring themes and outcome patterns across experiential learning models, employer-engaged initiatives, and institutional workforce programs. Comparative analysis enabled identification of common workforce readiness indicators and scalable educational practices relevant to the proposed BPS framework.

Finally, thematic workforce-policy interpretation connected empirical findings with broader public higher education priorities, workforce mobility concerns, adult learner needs, and AI-era labor-market transformation. This interpretive approach supported the study's broader objective

of evaluating how career-connected learning infrastructures may inform development of interdisciplinary professional studies models within the CSU system. In addition to organizational workforce-learning reports, the study triangulated findings across peer-reviewed higher education literature, national workforce readiness reports, employability studies, and public policy analyses addressing adult learning, AI readiness, and experiential education. This triangulation strengthens interpretive validity by situating organizational workforce outcomes within broader higher education and labor-market research.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied primarily on secondary datasets and organizational reports rather than independently collected primary data. Secondary data analysis limits researcher control over data collection procedures, variable definitions, and measurement consistency (Johnston, 2023). Second, the study employed a nonexperimental design, preventing direct causal conclusions regarding experiential learning participation and workforce outcomes.

Institutional variability across career-connected learning ecosystems may also influence generalizability. Educational institutions differ substantially in student demographics, employer partnerships, regional labor markets, funding structures, and implementation strategies. Consequently, findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than universally predictive across higher education contexts. Nevertheless, the breadth of available workforce-learning data provides valuable insight into emerging trends shaping adult education, employability, and professional studies development in the AI era.

Findings

Employability and Workforce Outcomes

The findings indicate that career-connected learning ecosystems substantially improve employability, workforce readiness, and professional confidence among participating learners. Across multiple experiential learning initiatives, students engaged in project-based workforce activities demonstrated stronger employment-related outcomes than peers participating in traditional classroom-only educational pathways. Recent workforce-learning reports indicate that approximately 76% of students participating in structured project-based learning initiatives reported receiving one or more employment offers following completion of experiential learning projects (Riipen, 2026). These findings align with broader national workforce research suggesting that applied learning experiences improve early-career employability and strengthen professional transition outcomes (Strada Education Foundation, 2024).

Career clarity and professional confidence also emerged as consistent themes across workforce-integrated learning models. Students participating in employer-engaged projects frequently reported improved understanding of career pathways, greater awareness of workforce expectations, and increased confidence regarding professional competencies. The integration of authentic workplace experiences into academic programs appears to strengthen vocational

identity formation and professional self-efficacy, particularly among adult and nontraditional learners navigating career transitions (Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2024).

Employer engagement outcomes further demonstrated positive workforce impacts. Organizations participating in project-based learning ecosystems reported improved productivity, increased operational efficiency, and enhanced access to emerging talent pools. Employer co-investment models, including compensated micro-internships and collaborative workforce projects, further reinforced the practical value of career-connected learning infrastructures. Table 1 summarizes employability and workforce readiness outcomes across major experiential learning initiatives, while Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between project-based learning participation and workforce readiness indicators.

Table 1. Proposed CSU BPS Curriculum Framework

The proposed California State University (CSU) Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) Curriculum Framework is designed as an interdisciplinary, workforce-integrated degree model emphasizing adult learner success, AI readiness, applied professional practice, and career-connected learning. The curriculum aligns with emerging labor-market demands by integrating leadership development, digital competencies, workforce adaptability, and experiential learning throughout the degree structure. The framework also incorporates prior learning assessment (PLA) and credit for prior learning (CPL), recognizing workforce experience, military service, technical certifications, and professional competencies as valuable forms of academic preparation.

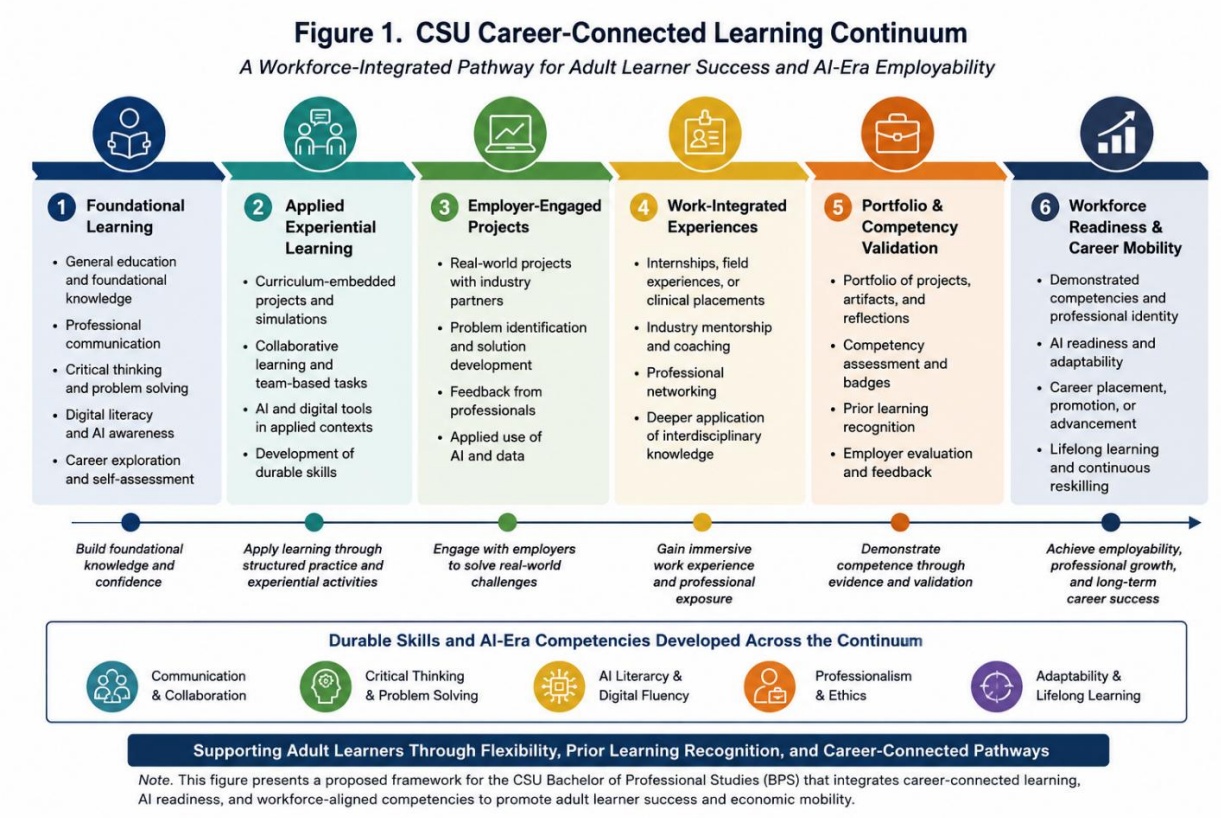
The curriculum is organized into six competency domains intended to prepare students for AI-enhanced workforce environments and interdisciplinary professional roles. Foundations of Professional Studies emphasizes communication, ethics, critical thinking, and research literacy. The AI and Digital Era Core focuses on artificial intelligence, digital fluency, technology-enhanced professional practice, and cyber ethics. Leadership and Organizational Systems develops competencies related to organizational leadership, strategic planning, collaboration, and innovation. Workforce and Community Studies examines workforce systems, career pathways, public policy, globalization, and social responsibility. Applied Professional Practice provides experiential learning opportunities through internships, project management, portfolio development, and field experiences. Finally, the Capstone and Future-Ready Learning domain synthesizes interdisciplinary learning through applied research, innovation, and future-oriented workforce problem-solving.

Competency Domain	**Representative Courses**	**Primary Workforce Competencies**
Foundations of Professional Studies	Professional Communication; Critical Thinking; Ethics and Leadership; Research Literacy	Communication, ethical reasoning, analytical thinking, evidence-based practice

AI and Digital Era Core	Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work; Digital Literacy; Cyber Ethics	AI literacy, digital fluency, technological adaptability, data-informed decision-making
Leadership and Organizational Systems	Organizational Leadership; Strategic Planning; Team Building; Conflict Resolution	Leadership, collaboration, organizational systems thinking, innovation
Workforce and Community Studies	Career Pathways; Workforce Systems; Policy and Governance; Community Engagement	Workforce mobility, civic engagement, interdisciplinary problem-solving
Applied Professional Practice	Project Management; Internship/Field Experience; Portfolio Development	Applied workforce skills, professional readiness, experiential learning
Capstone and Future-Ready Learning	Professional Studies Capstone; Innovation and Entrepreneurship	Future-ready adaptability, innovation, lifelong learning

Collectively, the proposed BPS curriculum framework reflects a competency-driven, workforce-oriented approach to higher education designed to support adult learners, strengthen regional workforce development, and enhance AI-era employability across the CSU system.

Figure 1. CSU Career-Connected Learning Continuum



Note. This figure presents a proposed framework for the CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) that integrates career-connected learning, AI readiness, and workforce-aligned competencies to promote adult learner success and economic mobility.

Figure 1 presents the proposed CSU Career-Connected Learning Continuum developed for the Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) framework. The figure conceptualizes workforce-integrated education as a progressive pathway supporting adult learner success, AI readiness, employability, and long-term career mobility. Unlike traditional higher education models that separate academic learning from professional application, the continuum integrates career-connected experiences throughout the student learning journey.

The continuum begins with Foundational Learning, which emphasizes communication, critical thinking, digital literacy, AI awareness, and career exploration. At this stage, students establish the academic and professional foundations necessary for workforce-integrated learning and future career adaptability. These competencies are particularly important for adult and nontraditional learners returning to higher education after extended workforce participation or military service.

The second stage, Applied Experiential Learning, introduces curriculum-embedded projects, collaborative learning, simulations, and AI-supported problem-solving activities. Students apply theoretical knowledge within authentic professional contexts while developing durable skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and professional communication. This stage reflects growing employer demand for practical competencies and interdisciplinary workforce readiness.

The third stage, Employer-Engaged Projects, emphasizes direct collaboration with industry and organizational partners. Students participate in real-world projects involving applied research, workforce problem-solving, digital tools, and employer feedback. These experiences strengthen

workforce confidence and help students develop portfolio-based evidence increasingly valued in AI-enhanced labor markets.

The fourth stage, Work-Integrated Experiences, includes internships, field experiences, clinical placements, and industry mentorship opportunities. Students deepen professional exposure while engaging in increasingly complex workforce activities requiring interdisciplinary knowledge and organizational adaptability. These experiences also facilitate professional networking and workforce identity formation.

The fifth stage, Portfolio and Competency Validation, focuses on documenting and assessing workforce competencies through portfolios, professional reflections, competency badges, prior learning recognition, and employer evaluations. This stage reflects the broader shift from seat-time measurement toward competency validation and demonstrated workforce capability (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024).

The final stage, Workforce Readiness and Career Mobility, represents the culmination of the continuum. Students demonstrate AI readiness, durable workforce competencies, professional adaptability, and lifelong learning capacities necessary for career advancement, workforce mobility, and continuous reskilling within rapidly evolving digital economies.

The lower section of the figure highlights durable skills and AI-era competencies developed across all stages, including communication, critical thinking, AI literacy, professionalism, ethics, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Collectively, the continuum illustrates how the proposed CSU BPS framework integrates experiential learning, workforce preparation, and AI-oriented competencies into a scalable ecosystem designed to support future-ready public higher education.

Durable Skill Development

The findings revealed substantial gains in durable workforce skills across experiential learning environments. Communication emerged as one of the most consistently improved competencies among participating students. Learners reported increased confidence in professional writing, client interaction, collaborative communication, and presentation skills following engagement in employer-connected projects (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024). These findings are particularly significant given persistent employer concerns regarding graduates' communication preparedness in professional settings.

Critical thinking and problem-solving abilities also demonstrated measurable improvement through applied workforce learning. Students participating in project-based experiences were frequently required to navigate ambiguous organizational challenges, evaluate data, collaborate across teams, and develop evidence-based recommendations. Such activities promoted higher-order cognitive engagement and adaptive reasoning skills essential for AI-enhanced labor markets (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Teamwork, professionalism, and adaptability further emerged as central outcomes of workforce-integrated learning ecosystems. Learners consistently reported improvements in collaborative

problem-solving, project management, workplace accountability, time management, and professional conduct. These competencies are increasingly recognized as foundational "human skills" resistant to automation and highly valued across industries (McKinsey Global Institute, 2024). Table 2 presents comparative durable skill development outcomes across major experiential learning categories, while Figure 2 illustrates the relative growth of key professional competencies reported by participating learners.

Table 2. Summary of Riipen Workforce Outcomes

Table 2 summarizes workforce, employability, durable skill, and AI-readiness outcomes reported across Riipen's large-scale career-connected learning ecosystem. The findings highlight the effectiveness of employer-engaged experiential learning models in supporting workforce readiness, adult learner success, professional confidence, and AI-era employability.

Outcome Area	**Reported Outcome**	**Implications for Workforce Education**
Employability Outcomes	76% of participating students reported receiving one or more job offers after project-based learning experiences.	Supports workforce readiness and transition into professional employment.
Career Confidence	80% of learners reported improved career clarity and professional confidence.	Strengthens vocational identity and long-term career planning.
Durable Skill Development	Students demonstrated gains in communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and professionalism.	Supports development of transferable workforce competencies.
AI-Related Skill Growth	113.5% increase in AI-related skill tagging across workforce-learning projects.	Demonstrates growing importance of AI readiness and digital literacy.
Employer Satisfaction	Employers reported increased productivity, operational efficiency, and workforce engagement.	Reinforces value of employer-engaged experiential learning ecosystems.
Adult Learner Access	Flexible virtual projects expanded participation among adult and underrepresented learners.	Improves educational equity and workforce accessibility.
Experiential Learning Scalability	Over 300,000 experiential learning experiences completed across institutions.	Demonstrates scalability of workforce-integrated educational infrastructure.

Collectively, these findings support integrating scalable career-connected learning models within the proposed California State University Bachelor of Professional Studies framework to strengthen employability, AI readiness, and workforce mobility.

Figure 2. Proposed BPS Workforce Ecosystem Model

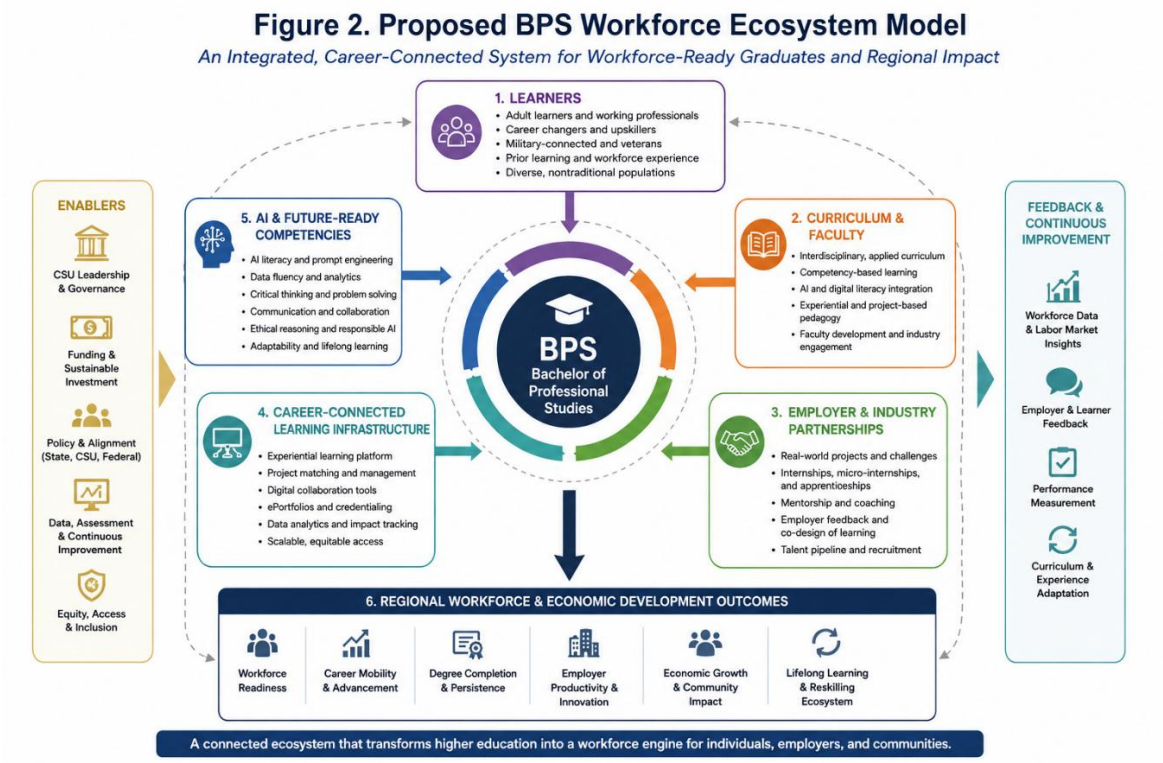


Figure 2 presents the proposed Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) Workforce Ecosystem Model for the California State University (CSU) system. The model conceptualizes the BPS as a workforce-oriented educational ecosystem connecting adult learners, faculty, employers, experiential learning infrastructure, AI-related competencies, and regional workforce priorities. The figure illustrates how interdisciplinary professional studies education may bridge higher education and evolving labor-market demands in the AI era.

At the center of the ecosystem is the Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS), positioned as a workforce-integrated and competency-driven degree framework supporting adult learners, military-connected students, working professionals, and career-transition populations. The BPS aligns academic learning, experiential education, and professional competency development.

The first ecosystem component involves Adult Learners and Workforce Participants, including returning students, working adults, military-connected learners, technical professionals, and individuals pursuing career mobility or reskilling opportunities. These learners often possess

workforce experience, technical expertise, and industry certifications that may be recognized through prior learning assessment (PLA) and credit for prior learning (CPL).

The second component involves Faculty and Curriculum Systems. Faculty facilitate interdisciplinary instruction, experiential learning, competency assessment, and workforce-integrated pedagogy. Curriculum systems incorporate AI literacy, digital fluency, leadership development, communication, ethics, and applied professional learning throughout academic pathways.

The third component focuses on Employer and Industry Partnerships. Employers contribute workforce projects, mentorship, internships, workforce simulations, and professional feedback. Employer engagement strengthens curriculum relevance while supporting workforce readiness and professional networking opportunities.

The fourth component involves Career-Connected Learning Infrastructure, including project-based learning platforms, digital collaboration systems, workforce analytics, experiential learning coordination, and AI-enhanced educational technologies. These infrastructures support scalable experiential learning across campuses and learner populations.

The fifth component emphasizes AI and Future-Ready Competencies, including AI literacy, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, communication, problem-solving, and lifelong learning. The model recognizes the growing importance of combining technological fluency with durable human-centered skills.

The outer layer of the ecosystem highlights Regional Workforce and Economic Development Outcomes, including workforce mobility, employability, degree completion, career advancement, economic resilience, employer innovation, and public workforce development. The BPS ecosystem is positioned not only as an academic model but also as a regional workforce strategy supporting California's evolving labor-market needs.

Collectively, Figure 2 illustrates how the proposed CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies integrates adult education, workforce-connected learning, AI readiness, employer collaboration, and competency-based higher education into a scalable ecosystem for future-ready public higher education.

AI Readiness and Digital Competency Growth

AI readiness and digital competency development emerged as another major finding of the study. Career-connected learning ecosystems increasingly integrate technology-enhanced projects requiring students to utilize digital platforms, AI-assisted workflows, data analytics, and interdisciplinary technological problem-solving. Recent workforce-learning data indicate a 113.5% increase in AI-related skill tagging across experiential learning projects during the past year alone (Riipen, 2026). This growth reflects the expanding integration of AI competencies across workforce sectors beyond traditional technical professions.

Technology-integrated workforce preparation was particularly significant within employer-engaged project models focused on digital transformation, cybersecurity, data analytics, advanced manufacturing, and AI-enhanced operational systems. Students participating in these projects developed competencies related to digital communication, AI literacy, technological adaptability, and collaborative innovation. These findings suggest that career-connected learning infrastructures may provide scalable mechanisms for integrating AI readiness into interdisciplinary higher education curricula.

Emerging digital competencies further included ethical technology use, interdisciplinary problem-solving, digital professionalism, and workforce adaptability within AI-enhanced organizational environments. Table 3 summarizes AI-related competency growth across workforce-learning initiatives, while Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between AI-oriented project participation and reported digital skill development.

Table 3. Durable Skill Development Metrics

Table 3 summarizes durable skill development outcomes associated with career-connected learning and workforce-integrated educational experiences. The metrics reflect employer-valued competencies increasingly identified as essential for AI-era employability, workforce readiness, professional adaptability, and long-term career success.

Durable Skill Area	**Observed Development Outcome**	**Workforce Relevance**	**Implications for BPS Curriculum**
Communication	Improved professional writing, presentations, and collaborative communication.	Supports workplace interaction, client engagement, and leadership effectiveness.	Embed communication-intensive assignments and employer feedback.
Critical Thinking	Enhanced problem-solving and evidence-based decision-making.	Supports adaptability in AI-enhanced and rapidly changing industries.	Integrate project-based problem-solving and applied analysis.
Teamwork and Collaboration	Increased effectiveness in interdisciplinary and group-based projects.	Strengthens organizational collaboration and workforce integration.	Expand collaborative experiential learning opportunities.
Professionalism	Growth in accountability, workplace etiquette, and professional conduct.	Improves employability and workforce preparedness.	Incorporate employer-engaged assessments and professional simulations.

Adaptability	Improved ability to respond to changing workplace conditions and technologies.	Supports workforce resilience and lifelong learning.	Emphasize flexible learning pathways and AI-era workforce readiness.
Digital Literacy	Expanded use of digital collaboration tools, analytics, and AI-supported workflows.	Essential for modern workforce participation and digital economies.	Embed AI literacy and technology-enhanced learning across curriculum.
Leadership	Increased confidence in organizational leadership and project management.	Supports advancement into supervisory and management roles.	Develop leadership-focused experiential learning and organizational studies.

These findings suggest that durable skill development should remain a central component of the proposed CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies framework, particularly as employers increasingly prioritize transferable competencies, AI readiness, and workforce adaptability within rapidly evolving labor markets.

Figure 3. AI-Era Professional Competency Framework

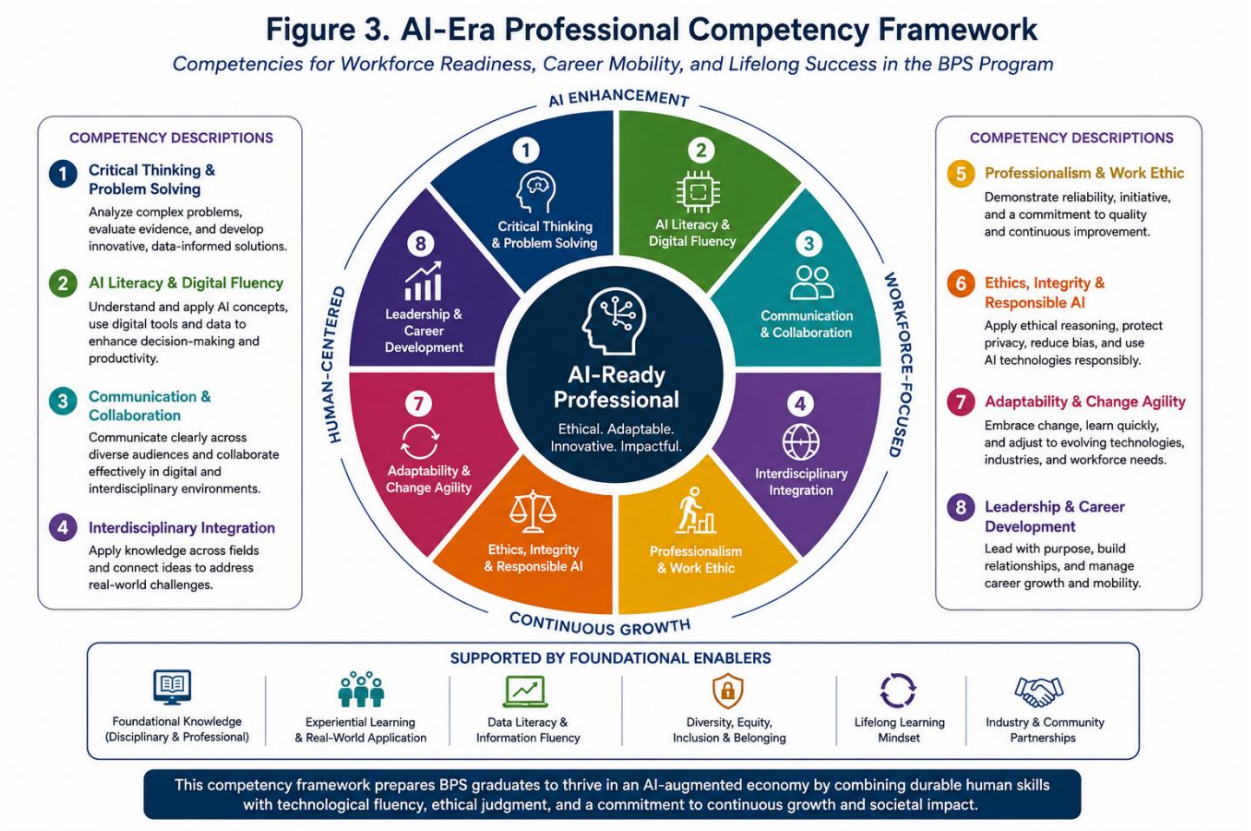


Figure 3 presents the proposed AI-Era Professional Competency Framework for the California State University (CSU) Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS). The framework identifies interdisciplinary competencies supporting workforce readiness, career mobility, lifelong learning, and professional adaptability within AI-enhanced labor markets. It integrates durable human skills, AI literacy, ethical reasoning, interdisciplinary problem-solving, and workforce-connected professional development into a unified competency structure.

The framework conceptualizes professional readiness in the AI era as the integration of technological fluency, durable workforce competencies, ethical judgment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and lifelong learning. At the center of the framework is the concept of the "AI-Ready Professional," representing graduates capable of navigating technologically enhanced professional environments while maintaining ethical responsibility and adaptability.

The first competency domain, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, emphasizes analytical reasoning, evidence evaluation, innovation, and data-informed decision-making. These skills are essential in AI-enhanced environments where professionals must evaluate information, interpret AI-generated outputs, and respond to complex organizational challenges.

The second domain, AI Literacy and Digital Fluency, focuses on artificial intelligence concepts, digital tools, data analytics, and technology-supported workflows. The framework positions digital fluency as a foundational competency across professional sectors.

The third domain, Communication and Collaboration, highlights interpersonal communication, interdisciplinary teamwork, and digital collaboration. These competencies remain highly valued because human-centered communication continues to support organizational effectiveness (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024).

The fourth competency domain, Interdisciplinary Integration, emphasizes synthesizing knowledge across disciplines and applying learning to authentic workforce problems. AI-era labor markets increasingly reward professionals capable of connecting technical, organizational, ethical, and social perspectives.

The fifth domain, Professionalism and Work Ethic, includes accountability, initiative, reliability, and continuous professional growth. These competencies support employability and long-term career advancement.

The sixth domain, Ethics, Integrity, and Responsible AI, reflects concerns regarding ethical technology use, privacy, bias reduction, and responsible AI implementation. The framework emphasizes ethical reasoning alongside technological capability.

The seventh competency domain, Adaptability and Change Agility, emphasizes flexibility, continuous learning, and responsiveness to technological and organizational change. Adaptability increasingly functions as a core employability competency.

The eighth domain, Leadership and Career Development, focuses on relationship building, workforce leadership, career planning, and professional mobility. These competencies support lifelong career management within evolving labor markets.

The lower section of the figure highlights foundational enablers supporting the competency framework, including experiential learning, data literacy, diversity and inclusion, industry partnerships, and lifelong learning mindsets. Collectively, the framework demonstrates how the proposed CSU BPS integrates AI readiness, workforce-connected education, and durable professional competencies into a future-oriented public higher education model.

Equity and Adult Learner Access

The findings highlighted the significant role of career-connected learning ecosystems in expanding educational access and workforce mobility for underrepresented and adult learner populations. Multiple experiential learning initiatives reported high participation rates among first-generation students, adult learners, military-connected learners, and historically underserved demographic groups. Flexible project structures, virtual collaboration platforms, and compensated experiential learning opportunities reduced participation barriers commonly associated with traditional internships and workforce development programs (OECD, 2023).

Adult learners particularly benefited from flexible experiential-learning structures capable of accommodating employment schedules, family responsibilities, and geographic constraints. Virtual project-based models enabled broader access to workforce experiences without requiring relocation or full-time internship participation. These accessibility implications are especially relevant for public university systems seeking scalable approaches to adult degree completion and workforce integration.

Table 4 presents demographic participation trends across workforce-learning initiatives, including representation among underrepresented populations and adult learners.

Table 4. AI-Related Skill Growth Indicators

Table 4 summarizes AI-related skill growth indicators associated with career-connected learning, workforce-integrated educational experiences, and AI-enhanced professional competency development. The indicators reflect the increasing importance of artificial intelligence literacy, digital fluency, interdisciplinary problem-solving, and technological adaptability within contemporary labor markets.

AI-Related Competency	Observed Skill Growth Indicator	Workforce Relevance	Implications for BPS Curriculum
AI Literacy	Substantial increase in student exposure to AI-supported workflows and digital systems.	Supports workforce readiness across AI-enhanced industries.	Integrate foundational AI concepts across interdisciplinary coursework.

Digital Fluency	Expanded use of collaborative technologies, analytics platforms, and digital communication tools.	Essential for participation in modern digital economies.	Embed technology-enhanced assignments and workforce simulations.
Data-Informed Decision-Making	Improved ability to interpret workforce data and apply analytical reasoning.	Strengthens evidence-based professional practice.	Incorporate data literacy and applied analytics into coursework.
AI-Enhanced Problem Solving	Growth in using AI tools to support innovation and organizational problem-solving.	Enhances workplace productivity and interdisciplinary adaptability.	Develop AI-supported project-based learning experiences.
Ethical AI Awareness	Increased understanding of responsible AI use, ethics, and bias reduction.	Supports ethical workforce participation and organizational accountability.	Integrate AI ethics and digital responsibility throughout curriculum.
Technological Adaptability	Improved responsiveness to emerging technologies and changing digital environments.	Supports lifelong learning and workforce resilience.	Promote flexible and adaptive learning pathways.
Interdisciplinary Integration	Students increasingly applied AI tools across multiple professional contexts.	Reflects growing interdisciplinary nature of AI-enhanced work.	Encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and applied workforce learning.

These findings indicate that AI-related competency development should remain central to the proposed CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies framework in order to support workforce readiness, career adaptability, and future-oriented employability within rapidly evolving digital economies.

Scalable Workforce-Integrated Learning

The study further demonstrated the scalability potential of workforce-integrated learning infrastructures. Curriculum-embedded experiential learning models enabled institutions to provide employer-connected projects across entire academic programs rather than limiting participation to small internship cohorts. Institutional scalability was supported through

centralized digital platforms, standardized project-management systems, employer partnership infrastructures, and faculty-supported workforce integration frameworks.

Employer co-investment models further strengthened sustainability by distributing workforce-development responsibilities across educational institutions and industry partners. Organizations increasingly contributed funding, mentorship, project supervision, and technological resources to support student workforce preparation. These developments suggest that scalable career-connected learning ecosystems may provide viable infrastructure for systemwide implementation of workforce-oriented degree models such as the CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies.

Table 5 summarizes scalable workforce-learning infrastructure components across institutional models, while Figure 4 presents a proposed systemwide framework for curriculum-embedded experiential learning integration within public higher education systems.

Table 5. Comparative Career-Connected Learning Models

Table 5 compares major career-connected learning models and workforce-integrated educational approaches relevant to the proposed California State University (CSU) Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS). The comparison highlights differences in experiential learning structures, workforce engagement strategies, AI readiness integration, scalability, and adult learner support.

Learning Model	Primary Characteristics	Experiential Components	AI & Workforce Integration	Relevance to CSU BPS
Traditional Internship Model	Single-placement workforce experience typically near graduation.	Internships, field placements, employer supervision.	Limited AI integration and inconsistent scalability.	Useful but insufficient alone for large-scale adult learner populations.
Project-Based Learning	Curriculum-embedded applied problem-solving activities.	Collaborative projects, simulations, employer-guided tasks.	Moderate integration of digital and AI-supported learning.	Supports scalable experiential learning across disciplines.
Career-Connected Learning Ecosystems	Integrated workforce-learning pathways across academic programs.	Employer-engaged projects, micro-internships, portfolio development.	Strong AI readiness and digital competency development.	Highly aligned with workforce-integrated BPS framework.
Competency-Based Education	Focus on measurable competencies	Portfolio assessments, competency	Supports adaptive digital and workforce-oriented	Strong alignment with adult learner flexibility and

	rather than seat time.	milestones, PLA/CPL.	assessment models.	workforce mobility.
Micro-Internship Models	Short-term employer-engaged workforce experiences.	Remote projects, workforce simulations, industry feedback.	High adaptability for AI-enhanced remote work environments.	Supports flexible access for working adults and nontraditional learners.
AI-Integrated Workforce Learning	Technology-enhanced workforce preparation using AI-supported systems.	Digital collaboration, analytics, AI-supported workflows.	Central emphasis on AI literacy and technological adaptability.	Essential for future-ready BPS curriculum design.
Proposed CSU BPS Model	Interdisciplinary workforce-integrated professional studies framework.	Career-connected learning embedded throughout degree pathway.	Comprehensive AI readiness, digital fluency, and competency validation.	Designed for scalable adult learner success and workforce mobility.

The comparative analysis suggests that the proposed CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies model provides the most comprehensive integration of workforce-connected learning, AI readiness, competency validation, and scalable experiential learning infrastructure for adult and nontraditional learners.

Figure 4. Workforce-Integrated Degree Architecture

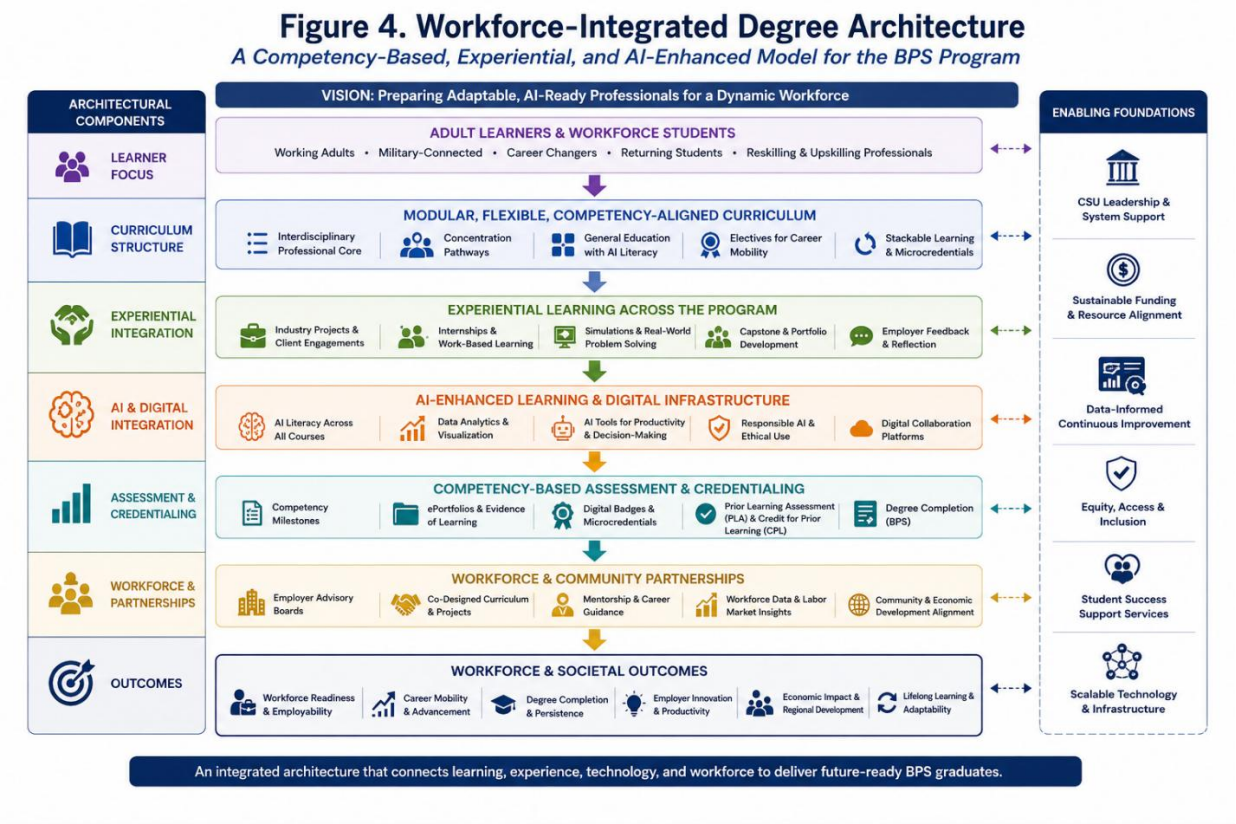


Figure 4 presents the proposed Workforce-Integrated Degree Architecture for the California State University (CSU) Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS). The figure conceptualizes the BPS as a competency-based, experiential, and AI-enhanced educational framework designed to prepare adaptable professionals for evolving labor markets. The architecture integrates adult learner support, interdisciplinary curriculum design, experiential learning, AI-oriented competencies, employer engagement, and competency-based credentialing into a unified public higher education model.

At the top of the architecture is the program vision: preparing AI-ready and workforce-adaptable graduates capable of lifelong learning, career mobility, and interdisciplinary professional practice. The model is designed to support adult learners, military-connected students, career changers, returning students, and working professionals seeking reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

The first structural layer focuses on a modular, flexible, and competency-aligned curriculum. This layer includes interdisciplinary professional core courses, concentration pathways, AI-integrated general education, career-mobility electives, and stackable learning opportunities such as microcredentials. The curriculum reflects growing transitions toward flexible educational models responsive to workforce transformation and adult learner needs.

The second layer emphasizes experiential learning integration throughout the program. Students participate in employer-engaged projects, internships, workforce simulations, applied problem-

solving activities, capstone experiences, and portfolio development. Experiential learning is embedded across the curriculum rather than limited to isolated internships.

The third architectural layer centers on AI-enhanced learning and digital infrastructure. Students develop AI literacy, data analytics competencies, digital collaboration skills, ethical AI awareness, and technology-supported decision-making abilities. The model recognizes AI readiness as an increasingly foundational workforce competency across industries.

The fourth layer involves competency-based assessment and credentialing systems, including competency milestones, digital badges, ePortfolios, prior learning assessment (PLA), credit for prior learning (CPL), and workforce evidence documentation. This structure reflects broader movement toward competency validation and portfolio-based employability.

The fifth layer emphasizes workforce and community partnerships. Employers, workforce organizations, industry advisory boards, and regional economic development partners contribute to curriculum co-design, mentorship, labor-market analysis, workforce projects, and career guidance. These partnerships strengthen alignment between higher education and workforce demands.

At the bottom of the architecture are anticipated workforce and societal outcomes, including employability, career mobility, degree completion, employer innovation, regional economic development, lifelong learning, and workforce adaptability. These outcomes position the BPS not only as an academic degree but also as a workforce development ecosystem supporting California's evolving economic priorities.

The right side of the figure highlights enabling foundations necessary for implementation, including CSU leadership support, sustainable funding, continuous improvement, equity initiatives, student support services, and scalable technological infrastructure. Collectively, Figure 4 demonstrates how the proposed BPS integrates curriculum, technology, experiential learning, workforce engagement, and competency-based education into a scalable architecture for future-ready public higher education.

Discussion

Implications for the CSU Bachelor of Professional Studies

The findings suggest that the proposed California State University (CSU) Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) represents a timely and strategically aligned response to workforce transformation, adult learner needs, and AI-driven labor-market disruption. The evidence supports the BPS as a workforce-integrated degree model capable of bridging longstanding gaps between higher education and employment. Unlike traditional undergraduate programs organized primarily around disciplinary content delivery, the BPS framework emphasizes applied competencies, experiential learning, professional adaptability, and workforce-connected educational pathways.

The findings further indicate that career-connected learning should function not as an optional co-curricular activity but as foundational curricular infrastructure embedded throughout degree pathways. Emerging workforce-learning ecosystems demonstrate that scalable employer-engaged projects, project-based learning, micro-internships, and digital workforce simulations can provide continuous opportunities for students to develop professional competencies, career confidence, and applied workplace skills (Riipen, 2026). These findings are particularly important for adult learners and working professionals who may face barriers to traditional internships due to employment obligations, geographic limitations, or family responsibilities.

Applied professional learning models also challenge traditional assumptions regarding internships as the primary mechanism for workforce preparation. Short-term, curriculum-embedded workforce experiences integrated across multiple courses may offer more scalable and equitable approaches to employability development than isolated late-stage internships alone. Such models are especially relevant within large public university systems such as the CSU system, where workforce integration must operate across diverse student populations and regional economies.

Although competency-based education and workforce-integrated learning are closely related, they represent distinct educational approaches. Competency-based education emphasizes mastery and assessment of measurable learning outcomes, whereas workforce-integrated learning focuses on applied experiential engagement connecting academic learning with authentic professional contexts. The proposed CSU BPS framework integrates both approaches by combining competency validation with career-connected experiential learning.

Reframing Higher Education in the AI Era

The findings additionally support broader calls to reframe higher education within the context of AI-era workforce transformation. Traditional educational models emphasizing seat time, credit accumulation, and passive knowledge acquisition increasingly appear insufficient for preparing students for labor markets shaped by automation, artificial intelligence, and digital disruption (World Economic Forum, 2025). Instead, higher education institutions face growing pressure to validate competencies, workforce readiness, adaptability, and applied problem-solving capabilities.

This transition from seat time toward competency validation has important implications for curriculum design, assessment systems, and professional credentialing. Career-connected learning ecosystems provide students with opportunities to generate workforce evidence through portfolios, employer evaluations, project deliverables, and demonstrated professional competencies. Such portfolio-based learning models align more closely with employer expectations emphasizing practical capability rather than academic credential attainment alone (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024).

AI-era employability frameworks further require interdisciplinary competencies combining technological fluency with human-centered skills such as communication, collaboration, ethical

reasoning, adaptability, and critical thinking. The findings suggest that workforce-integrated professional studies programs may be particularly effective in supporting these demands because they integrate digital literacy, organizational systems, applied learning, and professional adaptability within interdisciplinary curricular structures. Consequently, the BPS may serve as an important institutional mechanism for preparing students for AI-enhanced professions and continuous workforce reskilling. Despite the potential benefits of workforce-integrated education, some scholars caution against reducing higher education primarily to labor-market preparation. Critics argue that overly instrumental workforce models may risk narrowing broader educational purposes related to civic engagement, critical inquiry, ethical reasoning, and intellectual development. Consequently, workforce-oriented professional studies programs must balance employability outcomes with broader humanistic and democratic educational goals.

Adult Learners and Economic Mobility

The findings reinforce the importance of flexible educational pathways for adult and nontraditional learners. Adult learners increasingly seek degree programs capable of recognizing workforce experience, military training, technical certifications, and prior professional competencies as meaningful forms of learning and preparation (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2024). Traditional higher education structures frequently fail to accommodate these realities, creating barriers to degree completion and economic advancement.

The BPS framework addresses these challenges through prior learning assessment, workforce competency recognition, flexible experiential learning models, and applied professional practice. Such approaches support professional mobility by reducing unnecessary duplication of learning while accelerating degree completion for working adults and military-connected learners. Career-connected learning ecosystems may further strengthen economic mobility by enabling adult learners to build professional networks, validate workforce competencies, and transition into emerging industries requiring AI-oriented skills and interdisciplinary adaptability.

The findings additionally suggest that workforce-integrated professional studies education may become increasingly important as technological disruption accelerates reskilling demands across industries. Adult learners will likely require ongoing educational engagement throughout their careers, making lifelong learning and professional adaptability central functions of public higher education systems.

Institutional Implications for CSU

Several institutional implications emerge for the CSU system. Faculty roles may evolve from primarily content-delivery functions toward facilitation of experiential learning, interdisciplinary problem-solving, workforce integration, and employer-engaged instruction. Faculty may increasingly collaborate with industry partners to design authentic workforce projects aligned with academic outcomes and labor-market needs.

Employer partnerships will likely become more central to curriculum development and workforce preparation. Career-connected learning ecosystems require sustained collaboration

among universities, employers, workforce organizations, and regional industries to support scalable project-based learning opportunities and competency validation systems.

Curriculum redesign may also become necessary to integrate AI literacy, digital competencies, applied professional learning, and interdisciplinary workforce skills across degree pathways. Traditional disciplinary silos may prove increasingly incompatible with workforce demands emphasizing adaptability and cross-functional problem-solving. Assessment systems may likewise require transformation, with portfolio-based learning, competency validation, employer evaluations, and applied project assessments supplementing or replacing traditional examination-centered approaches. Accreditation agencies may increasingly evaluate workforce readiness, employability outcomes, and career-connected learning integration as indicators of institutional effectiveness and educational quality.

Theoretical Implications

The findings carry several theoretical implications for higher education and workforce-learning scholarship. First, they support expanding experiential learning theory beyond isolated internship models toward scalable, ecosystem-based frameworks integrating repeated professional engagement across academic pathways. Second, the findings contribute to emerging theories of career-connected learning ecosystems emphasizing interactions among institutions, employers, learners, technology platforms, and workforce systems.

Finally, the study supports development of workforce-integrated higher education frameworks positioning employability, adaptability, lifelong learning, and AI readiness as central components of contemporary public higher education missions. These evolving frameworks may increasingly shape the future of professional studies education within large public university systems such as CSU.

Recommendations

Recommendations for CSU System Implementation

The findings suggest that the California State University (CSU) system is well positioned to become a national leader in workforce-integrated higher education through implementation of the proposed Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS). Successful implementation, however, will require intentional planning, scalable infrastructure development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and long-term workforce partnerships. Several recommendations emerge regarding future development of the BPS framework and broader workforce-connected educational initiatives within CSU.

Develop Scalable Experiential Learning Infrastructure

First, CSU should prioritize development of scalable experiential learning infrastructure capable of supporting career-connected learning opportunities across campuses, disciplines, and student populations. Traditional internship models alone are unlikely to meet the needs of large public university systems serving diverse adult and nontraditional learners. Instead, CSU should invest

in centralized digital platforms, employer-engaged project systems, virtual workforce simulations, micro-internships, and curriculum-embedded experiential learning models operating at institutional scale.

Scalable infrastructure is particularly important because workforce-integrated learning opportunities remain unevenly distributed across institutions and student populations (Strada Education Foundation, 2024). Adult learners, military-connected students, part-time learners, and students balancing employment responsibilities often encounter barriers to participating in traditional internships. Virtual project-based learning systems and employer-engaged digital platforms may substantially expand access to applied workforce experiences while reducing geographic, scheduling, and financial limitations.

CSU may also benefit from developing systemwide experiential learning coordination mechanisms capable of supporting employer recruitment, faculty training, project management, competency tracking, and workforce outcome assessment. Such infrastructure could strengthen consistency across campuses while supporting regional economic alignment and workforce mobility initiatives.

Integrate AI Readiness Across the BPS Curriculum

Second, CSU should integrate AI readiness and digital competency development throughout the BPS curriculum rather than confining such instruction to isolated technology courses. AI, automation, and digital transformation increasingly influence professional sectors including healthcare, education, business, logistics, public administration, manufacturing, and nonprofit leadership (World Economic Forum, 2025). Consequently, workforce education must prepare students to navigate AI-enhanced professional environments regardless of disciplinary specialization.

AI readiness should include not only technical literacy but also ethical reasoning, interdisciplinary collaboration, digital communication, data-informed decision-making, technological adaptability, and critical evaluation of AI-generated information. Embedding AI-oriented competencies throughout coursework may better prepare students for continuous workforce transformation and emerging digital economies.

The findings further suggest that career-connected learning environments provide ideal contexts for integrating AI readiness into applied workforce experiences. Employer-engaged projects involving digital problem-solving, AI-supported workflows, data analytics, and interdisciplinary innovation may significantly strengthen workforce preparedness and professional adaptability among adult learners.

Expand Prior Learning Assessment Systems

Third, CSU should continue expanding prior learning assessment (PLA) and credit for prior learning (CPL) systems to better recognize workforce-acquired competencies, military service, technical certifications, apprenticeships, and professional experience. Adult learners increasingly enter higher education possessing extensive experiential knowledge and industry expertise that

traditional academic structures often fail to acknowledge adequately (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2024).

Expanding PLA/CPL systems may improve adult learner persistence, reduce unnecessary duplication of learning, accelerate degree completion, and strengthen educational equity. Workforce competency validation also aligns closely with broader shifts toward competency-based employability frameworks emphasizing demonstrated skills and applied capabilities rather than seat time alone.

To support consistent implementation, CSU may consider developing standardized systemwide PLA guidelines, portfolio evaluation frameworks, faculty review procedures, and competency assessment criteria. Such efforts could enhance institutional transparency while strengthening adult learner confidence and workforce alignment.

Establish Employer-Engaged Project Ecosystems

Fourth, CSU should establish long-term employer-engaged project ecosystems capable of integrating regional industries directly into workforce preparation processes. Sustainable workforce integration requires more than isolated employer partnerships; it demands ongoing collaboration among universities, workforce organizations, employers, economic development agencies, and community stakeholders.

Employer-engaged ecosystems may include project-based coursework, industry-sponsored challenges, paid micro-internships, workforce simulations, applied capstone experiences, and interdisciplinary consulting projects. These approaches not only improve workforce readiness but also strengthen regional economic development by aligning educational outcomes with labor-market demands (OECD, 2023).

Such ecosystems are particularly valuable for adult learners because they provide opportunities to demonstrate competencies, build professional networks, and develop portfolio-based workforce evidence without interrupting employment or family responsibilities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several directions for future research also emerge from this study. Longitudinal workforce outcome studies are needed to examine employability, career mobility, salary progression, and professional advancement associated with workforce-integrated professional studies education. Such evidence would provide stronger insight into the sustained impact of experiential learning ecosystems on adult learner success.

Comparative analyses across CSU campuses may help identify institutional practices, regional workforce partnerships, and implementation strategies associated with successful workforce-integrated educational models. Because CSU campuses serve diverse populations and regional economies, comparative studies could reveal important contextual variations in workforce-learning effectiveness.

Future scholarship should also explore AI-readiness assessment models capable of evaluating interdisciplinary digital competencies, technological adaptability, and AI-enhanced professional preparedness. Existing employability frameworks often inadequately capture emerging workforce demands associated with automation and digital transformation.

Finally, additional research is needed regarding adult learner persistence, workforce mobility, and career transitions within professional studies education. Studies examining military-connected learners, first-generation students, and underrepresented adult populations may provide important insight into how workforce-integrated educational models support educational equity and economic mobility within public higher education systems.

Conclusion

The future of professional studies education is increasingly shaped by workforce integration, artificial intelligence (AI) readiness, and competency-based learning frameworks. As labor markets continue to evolve through automation, digital transformation, and interdisciplinary workforce demands, traditional higher education models centered primarily on classroom instruction and credential accumulation may no longer adequately prepare learners for long-term professional success. Public universities are therefore increasingly expected to provide flexible, applied, and workforce-connected educational pathways capable of supporting employability, adaptability, and lifelong learning (World Economic Forum, 2025).

The findings of this study demonstrate that scalable career-connected learning ecosystems represent effective mechanisms for improving workforce readiness, durable skill development, professional confidence, and employability outcomes. Employer-engaged projects, experiential learning infrastructures, and technology-enhanced workforce experiences provide students with opportunities to develop practical competencies, AI-oriented skills, and portfolio-based evidence increasingly valued within contemporary labor markets (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024). These models also expand access to workforce preparation for adult, military-connected, and nontraditional learners who may face barriers to traditional internships and workforce development opportunities (CAEL, 2024).

The proposed California State University Bachelor of Professional Studies has significant potential to become a transformative model for workforce-oriented public higher education. By integrating prior learning recognition, interdisciplinary curriculum design, AI readiness, and scalable experiential learning, the BPS framework may strengthen adult learner success, workforce mobility, regional economic development, and future-ready educational innovation across the CSU system (Riipen, 2026).

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