

ACT Work Ready Communities: A Summary of the 2014 Survey Results

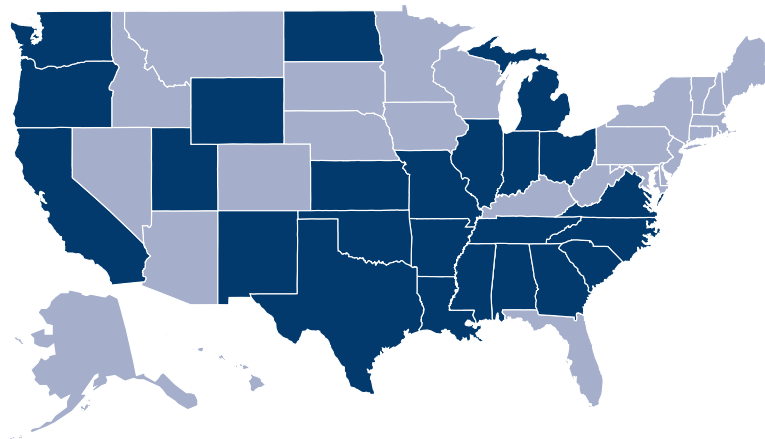
The mission of ACT is to help people achieve education and workplace success. At a time when the nation's economy is quickly changing and the skill needs of employers are constantly shifting, it is critical that we build successful collaborative efforts among businesses, workers, policymakers, educators, and economic developers. These efforts must be based on meaningful data that link education and workforce development, align to economic development and the needs of employers, and match individuals' skill sets with jobs to sustain and grow the workforce.

ACT is committed to helping people succeed in the current and future workforce. To that end, the ACT Work Ready Communities (ACT WRC) initiative aims to provide a stronger bond between states or counties and their respective workforce development partners. The ACT WRC initiative enables communities to leverage a proven framework to build a sustainable community approach that unites county leaders around common and meaningful goals that result in positive change for all stakeholders.

The ACT WRC initiative began in 2012 and, as of July 2015, 60 communities in 24 states had achieved certified ACT Work Ready Community status (see map for the states in which these communities are located).

States (in dark blue) with state- or county-led ACT Work Ready Communities as of July 2015:

Alabama
Arkansas
California
Georgia
Illinois
Indiana
Kansas
Louisiana
Michigan
Mississippi
Missouri
New Mexico
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio
Oklahoma
Oregon
South Carolina
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Virginia
Washington
Wyoming



Achieving certified ACT WRC status means that the community has a robust, connected workforce development program in place. Certification of a participating ACT WRC is based on:

- the number of individuals in its emerging, transitioning, and current workforces who have earned an ACT National Career Readiness Certificate™ (ACT NCRC®), a portable credential that uses performance on selected ACT WorkKeys® assessments to demonstrate achievement and a certain level of workplace employability skills; and
- the number of its employers recognizing or recommending the ACT NCRC in support of the community becoming a certified ACT WRC.

These numbers are established by goals developed from the ACT WRC common criteria (http://workreadycommunities.org/resources/Criteria_for_Certification.pdf).

Users comment on the value of the ACT NCRC and ACT WorkKeys:

The ACT NCRC gave me a lot of confidence because it went back and showed me that a lot of the skill set that I had, I didn't know I had. It came out through the ACT NCRC. It gave me confidence because it reinforced some of the things that I knew and it helped point out areas I was weak in that I needed to grow in for future job opportunities.

Skip Palma, Veterans Employment Specialist, Community Solutions of Clackamas County, Oregon City, Oregon

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Jay Dunwell, chair of the Michigan [ACT] Work Ready Communities Initiative and president of Wolverine Coil Spring of Grand Rapids, said using ACT WorkKeys has helped his company identify high-potential employees like Diego Arvico.

Arvico was packing boxes at Wolverine when company officials noticed his high test scores put him in the "gold category." Company officials have since trained him to operate a coiling machine and as a CNC setup technician.

Jim Harger, Grand Rapids Press (Michigan)

• • •

One of the chief challenges is to bring on the right talent, because you don't have a lot of budget for making mistakes. And [the ACT NCRC] program allows you to assess people ahead of time, before they come in the door.

Wayne Skipper, President, Concentric Sky, Eugene, Oregon

Once certified, a community may continue to maintain its certification and add new objectives, such as closing skills gaps by helping individuals improve their work readiness skills, conducting job analyses to help companies better leverage the ACT NCRC in hiring and promotion, and integrating the ACT NCRC as the foundational level in the model of stackable credentials established by the US Department of Labor to help ensure that local targets are aligned with the skills needed in high-demand careers.¹

The Need for ACT WRCs

Communities that are motivated to ensure that education and training match the needs of employers, lead to jobs, and help individuals advance in their careers are supported by the ACT WRC framework. As highlighted in *ACT's Policy Platform: Workforce Development*, education and workforce development must be linked and aligned with the needs of employers in communities so that candidates can find and succeed in jobs.

While this might sound easy, creating a sustainable, collaborative workforce development approach is hard work, especially because workforce development efforts are typically fragmented across multiple agencies, each with its own funding stream often tied to unique and disconnected performance outcomes. In contrast, the ACT WRC initiative connects key workforce development leadership with the private sector to build a robust, sustainable, collaborative workforce development approach.

How to Become an ACT WRC

In order to become an ACT WRC, state or county leadership teams first apply to become involved in the initiative. Once an application is submitted and approved, ACT supports the leadership team via the ACT WRC Academy. The Academy helps teams develop a holistic approach to leveraging the ACT WRC into a broader strategy tailored to meet their needs while also assembling a tactical plan to achieve their overall goals based on the ACT WRC common criteria.

In a state initiative, ACT works with state leadership to help build a plan for certifying and sustaining counties in an approach aligned with state economic development. Often, states create additional goals beyond those developed by ACT. (For example, a state may also wish to establish a minimum target percentage for high school graduation.) While the state is responsible for working with counties, including providing technical and communication support, ACT will provide additional support to counties as requested by the state.

In a county initiative, ACT works directly with the county leadership to build a local plan for certifying and sustaining the county, ensuring alignment to its economic development needs and providing technical and communication support. Here, only the ACT-developed goals are used to certify.

¹ As an example of the last of these objectives, two ACT WRC-certified counties in East Central Indiana use a Silver-level ACT NCRC as a stackable credential toward the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council's Certified Production Technician certificate.

Key Findings

The following pages summarize key findings from the 2014 ACT Work Ready Communities Survey, to which county leaders, businesses, and ACT NCRC holders participating in either state-led or county-led ACT WRC initiatives responded.²

The survey's goal was to identify areas of strength and potential areas of improvement regarding the overall ACT WRC initiative and some of its specific components. Within each group of survey respondents, ACT aggregated the results from state- and county-led initiatives.

County leaders were asked for their opinions about the ACT WRC initiative, while ACT NCRC holders were asked for their opinions about the certificate. Businesses were asked for their opinions about both the ACT WRC and the ACT NCRC. Response counts and rates for each group appear in the table below.

Group	N	Rate (%)
County Leaders	203	19.4
Businesses	443	8.9
Certificate Holders	1,852	6.7

Overall, ACT WRC initiatives received strong support both from county leaders and businesses; the ACT NCRC received fairly strong support both from the certificate holders and from the businesses.

Selected responses are highlighted on the following pages.

A user comments on the value of the ACT WRC initiative:

***Ed Cowgill**, personnel director at Indiana Ticket/Muncie Novelty, which employs 170 people in the manufacturing of wristbands, tickets for sporting events, pull tabs and other products, calls [ACT] Work Ready [Communities] a "tremendous resource" that has made his job easier.*

Seth Slabaugh, *Star Press*
(Muncie, Indiana)

The governor of Missouri comments on an ACT WRC county initiative in his state:

"In speaking with local leaders, it is clear that [Pettis County] takes a team approach to making sure workers here have the skills they need to compete and win in a global economy," [Gov. Jay] Nixon said. "This community is an outstanding example of what is possible when educators, community leaders, and business leaders work together."

Annabeth Miller,
Sedalia Democrat (Missouri)

² Surveys were sent to potential respondents in the following states: Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia (state-led initiatives); Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Ohio, Texas, Wyoming (county-led initiatives).

Responses about the ACT WRC Initiative

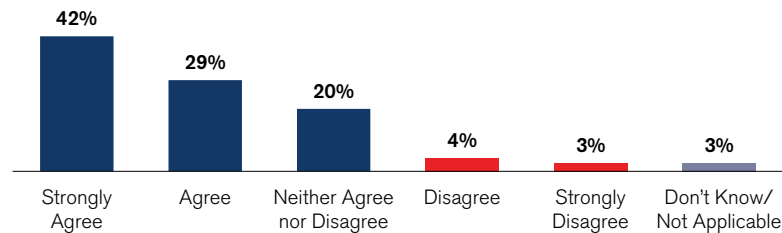
County Leaders

For the three statements below, county leaders were asked to choose one of the following responses indicating how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement:

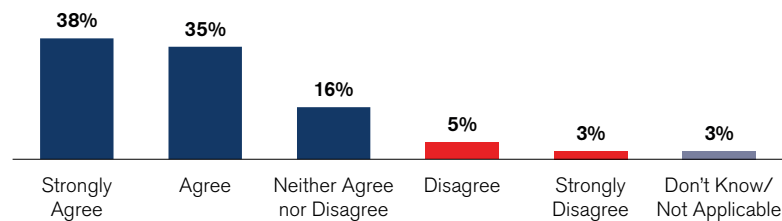
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Not applicable

Seven in 10 (71%) county leader respondents agreed that participating in the ACT WRC initiative helps their counties have a cohesive workforce development strategy; seven in 10 (73%) agreed that participation is improving workforce development partnerships in their community; and nearly eight in 10 (78%) would recommend the initiative to other counties.

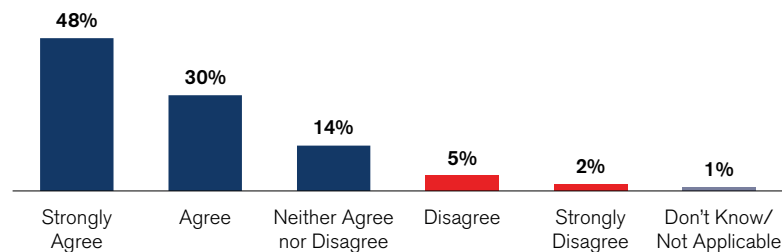
Participating in the ACT Work Ready Communities initiative helps my county have a cohesive workforce development strategy.



My county's participation in the ACT Work Ready Communities initiative is improving workforce development partnerships in my community.



I would recommend the ACT Work Ready Communities initiative to other counties.

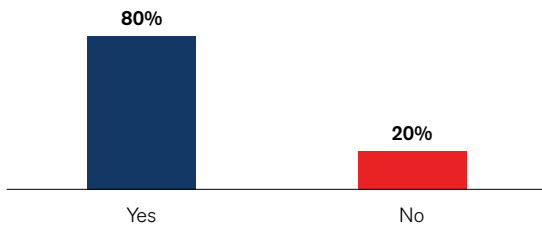


County leaders were also asked the following questions about whether they use the ACT WRC initiative, or the data generated from it, to:

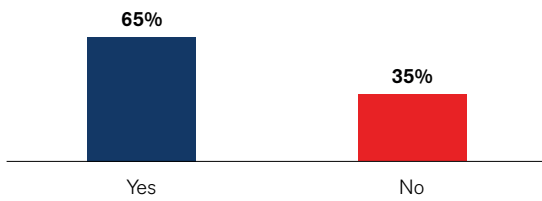
- Improve local workforce efforts
- Promote the county to new businesses
- Support current businesses

In each case, a clear majority of respondents reported using the data in these ways.

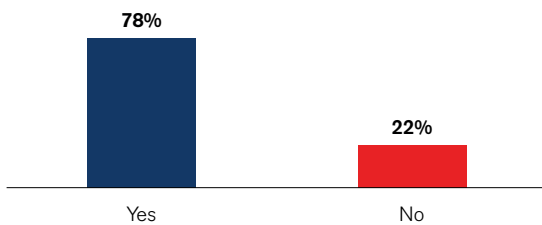
Are you using the ACT Work Ready Communities data to improve your local workforce development efforts?



Are you using the ACT Work Ready Communities data to promote your county to new businesses?



Are you using your ACT Work Ready Communities initiative to support your current businesses?



Businesses

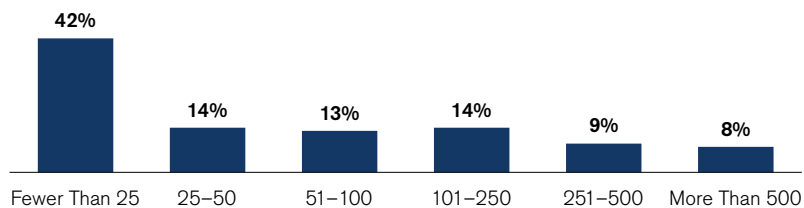
Almost half of businesses (49%) indicated that they are in the manufacturing, educational services, or “other services” industries (the three most common responses), with manufacturing the most commonly reported of these. Manufacturing is also the most common industry represented among all businesses involved in ACT WRC initiatives nationwide. This is not surprising, as manufacturing is one of several industries that make consistent use of evidence-based employee selection strategies such as the ACT NCRC. Also, manufacturing is typically the primary industry that economic developers want to attract to their communities and is therefore often a focus of states or counties in ACT WRC initiatives.

Which of the following best describes your company’s industry?



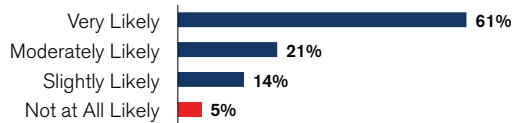
More than half of businesses (56%) indicated that they employ 50 or fewer people at their local site, with three-fourths of this group (42% of the total, and by far the most common response) employing fewer than 25. At the other end of the range, 17% of businesses indicated that they employ more than 250 people, with just less than half of these (8% of the total, and the least common response overall) employing more than 500.

How many people are employed by your company at your local site?



An overwhelming majority of business respondents (96%) reported that their companies are likely, to one degree or another, to support the ACT WRC initiative in their state or county, with the bulk (64% of this majority, 61% of the total) indicating “very likely.”

How likely is your company to support the ACT Work Ready Communities initiative?

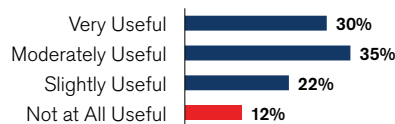


Responses about the ACT NCRC

Businesses

Businesses were asked about the usefulness of the ACT NCRC when they are looking for skilled employees. A large majority (87%) reported that the ACT NCRC was useful to one extent or another, with the most common response (40% of this majority, 35% of the total) being “moderately useful.”

How useful is the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate when you are looking for skilled employees?

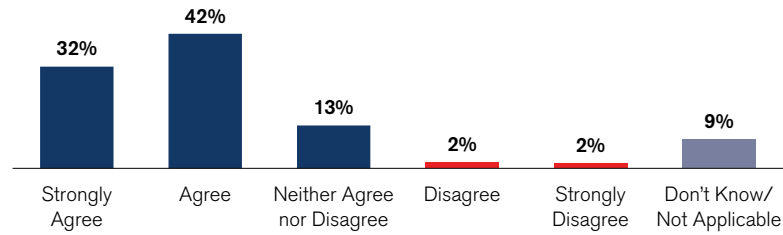


For the first three statements on the next page, businesses were asked to choose one of the following responses indicating how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement:

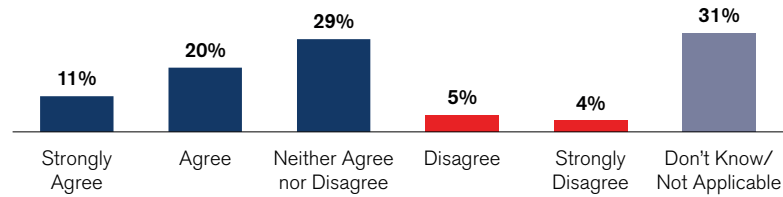
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Not applicable

Nearly three-fourths (74%) of businesses reported that they would recommend the ACT NCRC to other businesses. However, only about three in 10 (31%) agreed that the ACT NCRC has helped them find better qualified employees, and only about two in 10 (22%) agreed that the ACT NCRC helps them reduce employee turnover.

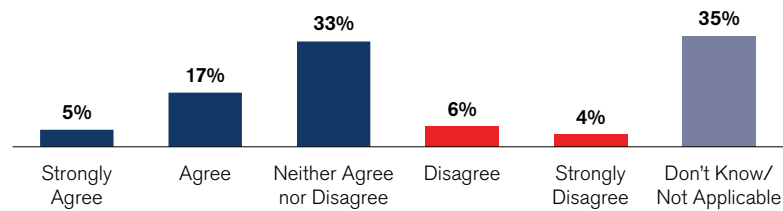
I would recommend the ACT NCRC to other businesses.



Using the ACT NCRC has helped my company to find better qualified employees.

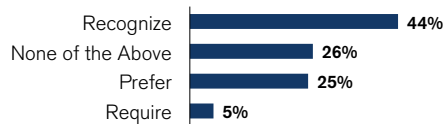


Using the ACT NCRC helps my company to reduce employee turnover.



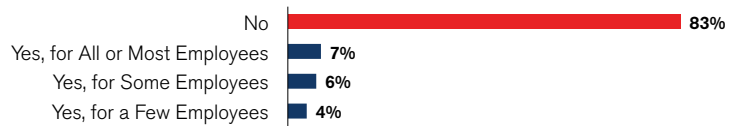
Businesses were also asked about the strength of the role the ACT NCRC plays in their hiring process. The majority (44%) reported that they “recognize” the certificate, while one-fourth (25%) reported that they “prefer” it, and one in 20 (5%) reported that they “require” it.³

Do you recognize, prefer, or require an ACT National Career Readiness Certificate in your hiring process?



When asked whether they use the ACT NCRC with current employees for promotion or training, only 17% reported that they did so to one extent or another.

Do you use the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate with current employees for promotion and/or training purposes?



³ Businesses that require the ACT NCRC have completed an ACT job profile for the available position. See www.act.org/workkeys/profiling for more information about the job profiling process.

Certificate Holders

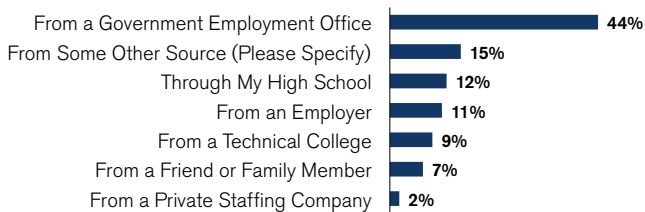
Nearly four in 10 ACT NCRC holders (39%) indicated that they are in the manufacturing, business/management/administration, or health sciences field (the three most common responses). As was the case with the business respondents (see page 6), manufacturing was the most commonly reported field among certificate holder respondents.

Which of the following best describes your field?



Forty-four percent of ACT NCRC holders reported first hearing about the certificate from a government employment office. This was by far the most common response, nearly three times higher than the second most common (“from some other source”).

How did you first hear about the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate?

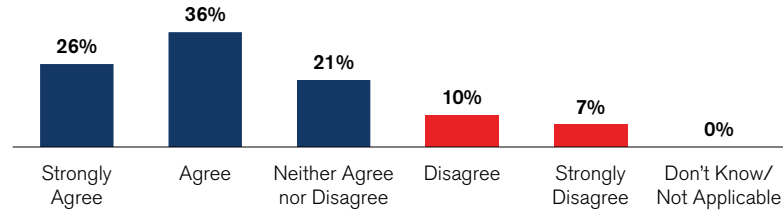


For the first three statements on the next page, certificate holders were asked to choose one of the following responses indicating how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement:

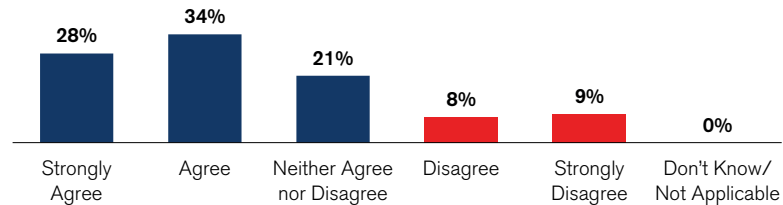
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Not applicable

About six in 10 (62%) of the certificate holder respondents agreed that the ACT NCRC was worth the time and effort it required and would recommend it to others seeking employment, while four in 10 (40%) agreed that the ACT NCRC gives them an advantage over other job applicants.

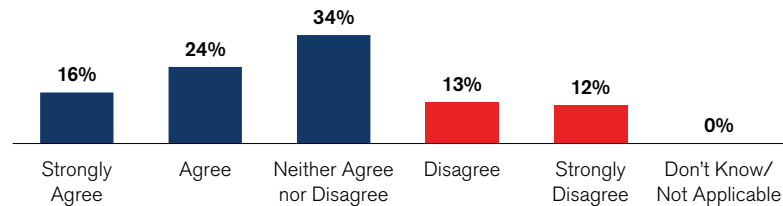
The ACT NCRC was worth the investment of time and effort it required.



I would recommend the ACT NCRC to others seeking employment.

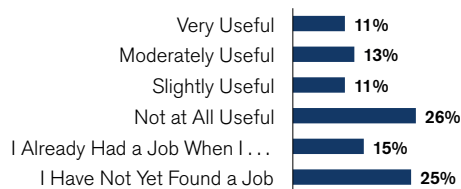


My ACT NCRC gives me an advantage over other job applicants.



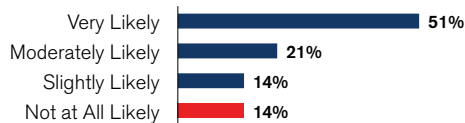
Certificate holders were also asked about the usefulness of the ACT NCRC in helping them find a job. About one-third (35%) reported that the ACT NCRC was useful to one extent or another. (When looking only at those respondents who did not have a job before earning the ACT NCRC and had found one by the time they completed the survey, this percentage rose to 58%.)

How useful was the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate in helping you find a job?



A large majority of certificate holders (86%) reported that they would be likely, to one degree or another, to include their ACT NCRC level (Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum) and/or their ACT WorkKeys assessment scores on their résumé, with the bulk (59% of this majority, 51% of the total) indicating “very likely.”

In the future, how likely is it that you will include your ACT National Career Readiness Certificate level and/or ACT WorkKeys assessment scores on your résumé?



Takeaways and Next Steps

Support for the ACT WRC initiative and/or the ACT NCRC was evident among all three groups of survey respondents. For example:

- Large majorities of county leaders find value in the opportunities afforded them by the ACT WRC initiative to develop a cohesive workforce development strategy and to strengthen workforce development partnerships in their community, and use the initiative or the data generated from it to improve workforce efforts and support their current businesses; a majority use the initiative or the data generated from it to promote the county to new businesses.
- A large majority of businesses would recommend the ACT NCRC to other businesses; a majority are very likely to support the ACT WRC initiative in their state or county; and a majority find the ACT NCRC very useful or moderately useful when looking for skilled employees.
- The majority of certificate holders believe that the ACT NCRC is a worthwhile investment of time and effort and would recommend it to others seeking employment.

Compared to the businesses, the county leaders had, on average, both the higher response rate (19.4%) and the more unambiguously positive opinions about the ACT WRC initiative. We believe that this may be due in part to the ACT WRC initiative filling the gap in building successful, sustainable, and collaborative workforce development efforts.

Again compared to the business leaders, certificate holders had, on average, both the lower response rate (6.7%) and somewhat less clearly positive opinions about the ACT NCRC. We believe that this may be due in part to self-selection (e.g., the certificate holders who chose to participate in the survey may have done so to convey dissatisfaction with some aspect of the certification process) or to the fact that a majority of the certificate holder respondents (51%) had either not felt that the ACT NCRC had been useful in finding their current job or had not yet found a job when they completed the survey. However, it is noteworthy that majorities of certificate holders found the ACT NCRC worth the time and investment it required and would recommend it to others who are seeking employment.

These takeaways have prompted us to consider the following steps with regard to furthering the ACT WRC initiative:

1. **Facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration between current and potential new participants in the ACT WRC initiative.** Given that large majorities of county leader respondents find value in the ACT WRC initiative, targeting additional county leaders elsewhere with information about the benefits of the initiative by participating counties and states could lead to increased participation nationwide.

2. **Continue to build goals beyond initial ACT WRC county certification.** It is clear that the ACT WRC initiative is achieving its intended results of helping communities build robust, collaborative workforce development efforts. To further that end, as counties continue to maintain their certification status, the opportunity of creating goals that help strengthen holistic workforce development approaches built upon the ACT NCRC can be helpful for long-term sustainability.
3. **Identify best practices that distinguish county-led from non-county-led ACT WRCs.** As mentioned above, county leaders had both the highest response rate among survey respondents and the most positive responses overall. Developing a greater understanding of why this was the case—by studying county-led ACT WRCs in depth and leveraging this understanding for improvement across all ACT WRCs—could help strengthen the initiative's effects and help better define the roles of states in providing support for ACT WRC initiatives.
4. **Increase employer education in areas where ACT WRCs are developed to help them better leverage and use the ACT NCRC in hiring and promoting practices.** Survey results indicate that employers support ACT WRC initiatives and find the ACT NCRC valuable. And, in fact, more than 10,000 employers nationwide recognize or recommend the ACT NCRC in support of their counties achieving ACT WRC certification. However, the survey results also show that more employer education is needed so that employers may leverage this value for improved hiring and cost savings. Such education should be broadened to help ensure that all industry segments and sizes are able to better understand and make use of the ACT NCRC.
5. **Increase economic developer education in areas where ACT WRCs are developed to help them better leverage and use the ACT WRC initiative in employer recruitment, retention, and expansion.** Evidence suggests that the best employer recruitment and expansion strategy is a robust employer retention strategy. Increased education among economic developers about the value of the ACT WRC initiative in employer outreach will help communities to better thrive.
6. **Help ACT WRCs develop better communication with certificate holders.** ACT NCRC holders are an integral part of each ACT WRC. Improved communications with certificate holders in ACT WRCs is a good next step.

This report has provided some insights on the state of the ACT WRC initiative as viewed through the lens of survey data acquired from county leaders, employers, and certificate holders. The results show that, after only two years, the intent of the initiative is taking root and showing positive results. Counties are becoming certified and the goals of the initiative are being achieved. The ability to help counties and states link education and workforce development, align to economic development, and ultimately aid employers in matching people to jobs is moving in a positive direction.

ACT intends to use the results of this survey and future surveys to inform efforts to increase the number of certified ACT WRCs across the country, improve participants' experiences in the initiative, and further educate employers so that more communities can integrate education and skills training with the needs of employers, more regions can strengthen their workforce systems, and more workers and businesses can succeed in the current and future economy.

For more information about the ACT Work Ready Communities initiative, please visit www.workreadycommunities.org.