2025-2026 CSUSM Exit Survey Results: Undergraduate Student Summary

The CSUSM Exit Survey ("Exit Survey") is administered to all degree-seeking graduating students every academic year in two waves, in the fall and spring. For the 2025-26 academic year, a total of 2,367 undergraduate and graduate students responded to the survey, achieving an overall 51.8% response rate.

This summary report highlights findings from the undergraduate student experience, contextualizes results by integrating student voices, and offers insights into changes over time by comparing survey results from Fall 2021 to present.

More detailed frequency results can be found in the Exit Survey frequency report available on the Institutional Planning & Analysis (IP&A) website at https://www.csusm.edu/ipa/surveys/graduation_survey.html.

Multi-year Findings

Post-graduation Plans

The Exit Survey is administered approximately two weeks before commencement and kept open an additional two weeks to capture students' post-graduation plans. Looking at aggregated post-graduation plans* across the past five academic years, the overall pattern has remained relatively stable: between 55% and 60% of undergraduate students report being employed or pursuing further education, with around 40% seeking employment.

Post-Graduation Status	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25	2025–26
Employed	28.9%	28.5%	26.9%	26.5%	28.1%
Pursuing further education	29.1%	29.8%	28.4%	29.5%	29.9%
Seeking employment	40.1%	40.3%	43.3%	42.2%	39.9%

**__Employed__ combines response options: continuing to work in the position held before graduation, have accepted a new employment offer, starting my own business and pursuing or continuing military service. __Pursuing further education__ includes accepted and applying into a graduate, teaching or professional preparation program.*

The 2025-26 academic year results show a decline in the percentage of graduates who were still seeking employment, falling to 39.9% from 42.2% in 2024-25 and 43.3% in 2023-24. At the same time, the percentage reporting they were employed increased to 28.1%, compared with 26.5% the previous year.

The results for respondents pursuing or planning further education remained steady at approximately three in ten graduates.

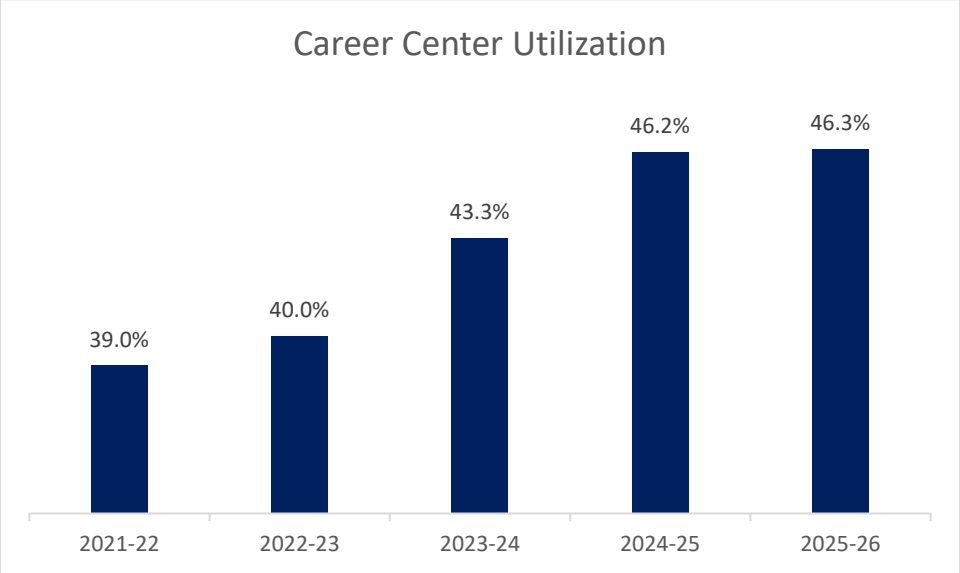
Employment Status	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25	2025–26
Continuing to work in a position held before graduation	16.5%	17.0%	16.1%	17.6%	18.1%
Accepted a new employment offer	9.8%	8.4%	8.8%	6.6%	7.1%

One notable trend is the continued increase in graduates who reported remaining in a position they held before graduation. This increased from 16.5% in 2021-22 to 18.1% in 2025-26, while the percentage reporting a newly accepted employment offer declined from 9.8% to 7.1% over the same period.

Together, these results suggest that the transition from college to employment does not necessarily occur through a new job offer immediately after graduation.

Career Readiness

Self-reported Career Center utilization has increased over the five-year period, reaching its highest level in 2025-26. The share of undergraduate respondents reporting that they attended events or used resources offered by the Career Center increased from 39.0% in 2021-22 to 46.3% in 2025-26.



Respondents who used the Career Center shared which services they used during their time at CSUSM. Engagement with career fairs, professional photo services, and the Cougar Career Closet have all grown over the five-year period. This pattern may indicate that students are increasingly using services that involve direct preparation or contact with employers, rather than relying only on online resources.

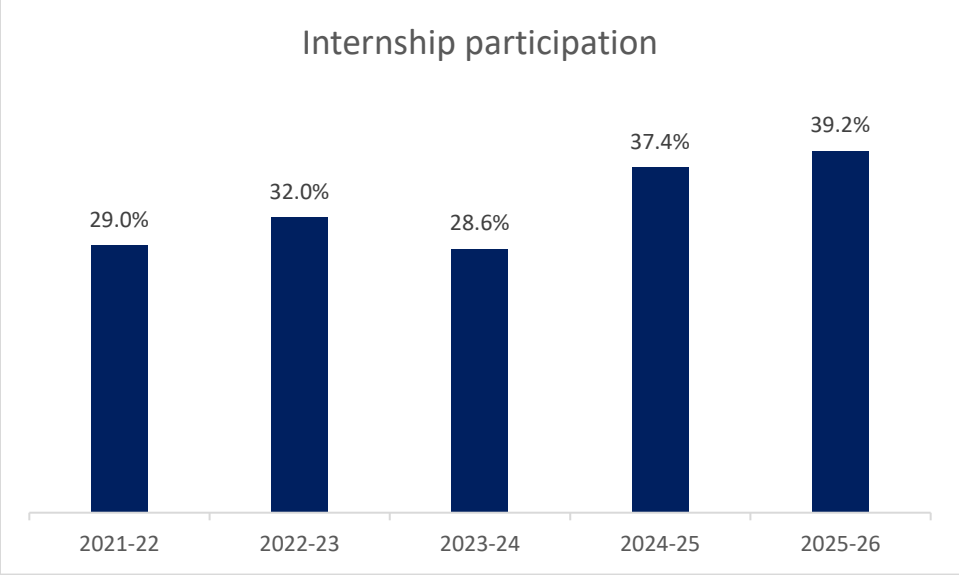
Career Center service	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Career/graduate school fairs	27.0%	37.2%	41.1%	46.1%	46.2%
Professional photos	5.9%	8.1%	10.9%	11.7%	17.2%
Cougar Career Closet	8.3%	10.5%	11.8%	13.9%	17.4%

**Percentages are calculated out of those who indicated they attended events or used resources offered by the Career Center*

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a High Impact Practice (HIP) and refers to opportunities in which students apply what they are learning through internships, clinical or field placements, research, practicums, capstone projects, labs, and other hands-on experiences (University of Iowa).

Internship participation provides one longitudinal indicator of experiential learning at CSUSM. The proportion of respondents indicating they had participated in an internship increased from 29.0% in 2021-22 to 39.2% in 2025-26, reaching the highest level in the five-year series.



Job-seeking Behaviors

The 2025-26 results provide a closer look at how graduates are finding employment and how actively students who are still seeking work have entered the job search. Among employed graduates, personal connections were the most common reported pathway into employment. Continuing in an existing job and obtaining a position through an internship were also commonly reported.

Selected reported pathway into employment	2025-26
Referred by friend, family member, or acquaintance	37.5%
Continuing in an existing job	17.3%
Through an internship	10.9%
Job posting on CSUSM career site/Handshake	6.2%
Career fair or networking event	5.3%

**Because respondents could select more than one response option, percentages are not intended to sum to 100%.*

Students who were still seeking employment were asked: "*How many jobs have you applied for in the last three months?"* Results indicate that students are in various stages of the job search process when they graduate from CSUSM. For example, in the most recent academic year, 18.2% of graduates still seeking employment reported submitting 12 or more applications, the highest level in the five-year series. At the same time, 38.5% had not submitted any applications yet.

Indicator	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Applied to 12+ jobs	12.8%	10.6%	13.6%	15.4%	18.2%
No applications yet	38.5%	49.1%	43.7%	39.3%	38.5%

Preparation for Life After Graduation

In response to CSUSM's focus on career readiness, new questions were added to the Spring/Summer Exit Survey administration, including the question: "*How prepared do you feel for life after graduation?"* Nearly 9 out of ten respondents (88.8%) indicated they felt somewhat or well prepared for life after graduation.

How prepared do you feel for life after graduation?	2025-26
Well prepared	37.4%
Somewhat prepared	51.4%
Not very prepared	8.9%
Not at all prepared	2.3%

If students indicated that they felt *well prepared* for life after graduation, they were asked the open-ended question: "*What part of your experience at CSUSM best prepared you for life after graduation?*" For students that stated that they felt *somewhat, not very prepared,* or *not at all prepared*, they were asked: "*In what ways could CSUSM have better prepared you for life after graduation?*".

Responses to these two questions were analyzed separately because they capture different perspectives: the first asks students to identify experiences that contributed to their preparation, while the second asks students to identify areas where they felt additional preparation would have been helpful. The analyses used a meaning-based thematic review of the full response. Coding incorporated AI-assisted review followed by human review and validation. Responses could receive more than one theme when a comment reflected multiple ideas, and the primary-theme frequencies and descriptions are presented in Appendix A.

The sections that follow highlight selected themes from the two open-ended questions to draw attention to specific aspects of students' experiences and use student comments to provide additional context for the quantitative findings.

Career Readiness and Professional Pathways

Qualitative findings add further perspective to the value of career resources. Students who indicated they were less than well prepared sought additional preparation for employment, career exploration, professional pathways, networking, job search, interviews, resumes/CVs, or graduate school pathways.

Student Voice **In what ways could CSUSM have <u>better prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Career Readiness***
"Resources to transition DSS students into the workforce. Such as how to get accommodations in work and a job interview without being discriminated. Advocacy and support groups for CSUSM alumni with disabilities."
"CSUSM could better prepare students for life after graduation by placing more emphasis on practical career readiness, such as job search strategies, networking, and real-world application of coursework. More structured support around internships and clearer connections between coursework and actual career paths would also improve the transition into the workforce."
"Providing more company tours, networking events, and helping connect with prospective employers."

Professional Readiness, Confidence and Transition

The career readiness and professional readiness themes are related, but they represent distinct ideas that emerged from student comments. Career readiness focuses on navigating employment and professional pathways, including job searches, interviews, networking, and career exploration. Professional readiness reflects how prepared students feel to transition from college and function in a professional setting, including confidence, resilience, independence, adaptability, and self-advocacy. Some students also described a gap between being academically prepared and feeling confident about the transition after graduation.

Comments included uncertainty about career direction, anxiety about life after graduation, and concerns about feeling ready to enter a profession, suggesting that preparation for graduating students includes both knowing how to navigate the job market and feeling ready to do so.

Student Voice: **In what ways could CSUSM have <u>better prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Professional Readiness, Confidence & Career Clarity***
I don't feel prepared… I don't have much direction for outside of a school routine. I think that CSUSM provides lots of opportunities to network that are optional, but I think that they need to be more necessary in order to push students to go to these networking events."
"I think I'm experiencing imposter syndrome and denial about my abilities to be ready for life after graduation."
"I met great people, and also made connections, I am just afraid of how life looks like after college."

Academic and Professional Skill Development

Themes related to academic and professional skill development are found across both open-ended questions, highlighting what students valued and what they wanted to strengthen.

Students who felt well prepared for life after graduation described coursework, disciplinary knowledge, research and writing, and transferable skills as important parts of their preparation.

Student Voice **What part of your experience at CSUSM <u>best prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Academic & Professional Skill Development***
"The application of every course and thing I learned to the real world outside of college made me feel prepared to go take on the real world with clarity and a sound mind."
"My classes were updated with current events. I feel that I have an understanding of how to apply what I've learned to real world applications."
"I think it was my major courses that ultimately prepared me for my life after graduation. Especially after taking the leadership courses for my major, it really helped me identify my calling."

Responses from students who felt less than well prepared described opportunities for improvement in academic and professional skill development. Further review of these comments showed that comments initially grouped under a broader Academic & Professional Skill Development theme reflected several different needs. Two clearer themes emerged: *Academic Quality & Curricular Alignment* and *Practical Skills & Life Preparation*.

These comments focused on the relevance, content, and structure of students' academic experiences. Some students wanted more coursework directly related to their major or intended field, while others described a desire for curriculum that more closely reflected current professional expectations.

Student Voice **In what ways could CSUSM have <u>better prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Academic Quality & Curricular Alignment***
"Courses should teach job orientated skills instead of theory."
"I just don't feel like the […] program has given me all the practical tools I would need for a lot of jobs. I also feel very limited in what I am able to achieve with my degree, despite being told I have a lot of options (and no other clarification on what that could entail)."
"Some of the courses focused on aspects that didn't impact my readiness for the workforce"

A smaller group of students described preparation in terms of practical knowledge needed after college. These comments frequently referred to personal finance, taxes, financial literacy, saving and investing, and other aspects of managing adult responsibilities. Although the theme represents a relatively small proportion of responses, the consistency of the comments suggests that some students distinguish between being academically prepared and knowing how to navigate practical responsibilities after graduation.

Student Voice **In what ways could CSUSM have <u>better prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Practical Skills & Life Preparation***
"I think there are just some real life skills that college misses like showing people how to save and invest money."
"A degree requirement class on systems like health insurance, tax filing, things about adult life that are vital."
"Offering workshops or information regarding financial aspects and life planning -- especially when it comes to loans"

Faculty Mentorship and Teaching

Faculty Mentorship & Teaching also emerged as a source of preparation for undergraduate respondents who felt well prepared. Students described faculty contributions in several ways. Some emphasized the quality of instruction, while others focused on guidance, encouragement, conversations with faculty, and support applying what they learned.

Student Voice: **What part of your experience at CSUSM <u>best prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Faculty Mentorship & Teaching***
"The advisor counselors, teachers and also the speakers telling about their educational experience and how they managed."
"I feel like the strong encouragement to succeed from all my current/previous professors helped me gain confidence in myself and the fact that I can achieve anything if I put my mind to it."
"Receiving mentoring from professors helped me plan for life after graduation and how to approach the next graduate school cycle."

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning came up as a qualitative finding and appeared as a theme for both well-prepared and less prepared students.

The qualitative results suggest that students valued experiential learning and desire more access to these kinds of opportunities. Students highlighted a variety of experiential learning experiences, referring to internships, research, clinical placements and other opportunities that allowed them to apply classroom learning in a real or simulated professional setting.

Student Voice: **What part of your experience at CSUSM <u>best prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Experiential Learning***
"The program prepared me for my career. I feel that my clinical placements heavily added to my learning and overall success."
"CSUSM provided me with valuable experience working in various hospitals and specialties, which helped me build familiarity and confidence…"
"The part of my experience at CSUSM that best prepared me for life after graduation was the strong emphasis on applied learning and reflection. Through service-learning placements, research-based coursework, and hands-on classroom experiences, I was able to connect theory to real-world practice…"

Student Voice **In what ways could CSUSM have <u>better prepared</u> you for life after graduation?** ***Theme: Experiential Learning***
"Experience doing research, it seems like research is selective at this school and seems like you have to be special to do so."
"I wish there were more internship opportunities built into course work earlier on."
"Better knowledge of what sorts of internships or other opportunities are available through the university. I suspect it's easier for those on-campus but I attended virtually."

<u>References</u>

The University of Iowa. (n.d.). *Experiential learning*. https://engage.uiowa.edu/faculty-and-staff/experiential-learning

Appendix A

<u>Qualitative Theme Frequencies</u>

The table below highlights the themes identified in the qualitative undergraduate responses along with the definitions. Each response was assigned one primary theme, with secondary themes coded when additional ideas were present. The frequencies and percentages reported in Appendix A reflect primary themes only. Selected themes are discussed in greater detail in the report.

What part of your experience at CSUSM <u>best prepared</u> you for life after graduation?			
Selected Primary Themes	**Definition**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Academic & Professional Skill Development	Students described coursework, curriculum, classroom learning, disciplinary knowledge, or transferable skills as preparing them for life after graduation.	134	25.6%
Faculty Mentorship & Teaching	Students identified faculty or instructors as central to their preparation through teaching, mentorship, guidance, encouragement, accessibility, or professional modeling.	104	19.8%
Experiential Learning	Students described internships, clinicals, practicum, fieldwork, research, capstone projects, labs, student teaching, service learning, or other applied experiences as preparing them through authentic practice.	83	15.8%
Career Readiness & Professional Pathways	Students identified career preparation, career exploration, job search preparation, employer/professional networking, graduate school preparation, or understanding career pathways as preparing them for life after graduation.	49	9.4%
Professional Readiness, Confidence & Resilience	Students described growth in confidence, independence, work-life balance, perseverance, time management, adaptability, self-advocacy, or readiness to manage post-graduation responsibilities.	39	7.4%
Student Engagement & Leadership	Students described co-curricular involvement, student organizations, campus leadership, peer community, volunteering, campus employment, or similar engagement as preparing them.	32	6.1%
Student Success Resources & Support	Students identified institutional resources and support structures, such as tutoring, writing support, advising, centers, program support,	16	3.1%

What part of your experience at CSUSM best prepared you for life after graduation?			
Selected Primary Themes	**Definition**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
	financial aid, or staff services, as preparing them.		
Holistic CSUSM Experience	Students indicated that the overall CSUSM experience or combination of multiple experiences prepared them, rather than a single specific element.	14	2.7%
Satisfied / Everything Prepared Me	Students explicitly indicated that everything, most experiences, or CSUSM overall prepared them well without identifying a more specific mechanism.	2	0.4%

**Qualitative table excludes ambiguous/insufficient context responses.*

In what ways could CSUSM have better prepared you for life after graduation?			
Selected Primary Themes	**Definition**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Career Readiness	Students sought additional preparation for employment, career exploration, professional pathways, networking, job search, interviews, resumes/CVs, or graduate school pathways.	174	27.4%
Experiential Learning	Students wanted more applied, hands-on, field-based, internship, clinical, research, practicum, capstone, or real-world learning opportunities.	85	13.4%
Satisfied with Preparation	Students indicated they were already prepared, could not identify additional preparation, or felt no additional support was needed.	60	9.4%
Resource Awareness & Student Engagement	Students reflected on awareness, timing, or use of available resources, involvement opportunities, and their own engagement with campus supports.	53	8.3%
Student Success & Transition Support	Students wanted more coordinated support navigating graduation and post-graduation transition, including advising, communication, resource timing, and check-ins.	51	8.0%

In what ways could CSUSM have <u>better prepared</u> you for life after graduation?			
Selected Primary Themes	**Definition**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Professional Readiness, Confidence & Career Clarity	Students expressed anxiety, uncertainty, lack of confidence, unclear career direction, imposter feelings, or self-perceptions of readiness for life after graduation.	46	7.2%
Academic Quality & Curricular Alignment	Students identified concerns about the relevance, content, quality, structure, or alignment of coursework and academic programs with their intended fields or post-graduation expectations.	37	5.8%
External Context	Students identified barriers or conditions largely outside CSUSM, such as labor-market conditions, hiring competition, licensing/certification systems, finances, family obligations, or geography.	23	3.6%
Practical Skills & Life Preparation	Students identified practical knowledge needed to manage everyday life and finances after graduation.	17	2.7%
Faculty Mentorship	Students described a need for faculty guidance, mentoring, encouragement, professional advice, or faculty-supported professional connections beyond classroom instruction.	12	1.9%
General Skill Development	Students sought broad transferable, workplace, or professional skills not clearly tied to a specific curriculum or practical life skill.	4	0.6%
Emerging Workforce Skills & Technology	Students explicitly identified AI, generative AI, digital literacy, automation, or future workplace technologies as desired preparation.	4	0.6%

**Qualitative table excludes ambiguous/insufficient context responses.*

Qualitative Methodology

Two open-ended questions were analyzed to provide context for the quantitative results: *"What part of your experience at CSUSM best prepared you for life after graduation?"* and *"In what ways could CSUSM have better prepared you for life after graduation?"* The analyses followed a six-stage coding process that used a meaning-based, iterative thematic approach, which included AI-assisted review and human review of every comment. More information on the qualitative coding process can be obtained by contacting the Office of Institutional Planning & Analysis survey team at survey@csusm.edu.

The qualitative results are used in this report to provide context for the quantitative findings and provide deeper insight into the results. Theme percentages indicate prevalence within the coded comments and should not be interpreted as population estimates. Quotations are included as examples of the broader themes and should not be read as representative of all students.