When Metageek’s Brian Tuttle (official title: Geek Herder) needs a new geek for his herd, he knows where to turn: The Department of Computer Science at Boise State University, where Tuttle earned his own degree.

The department has provided this Boise high-tech firm that specializes in wireless tools with a steady supply of student help and future employees. In fact, the relationship is so important to Metageek owner Ryan Woodings that the company is a main partner with Boise State, the state of Idaho and several other local tech firms in a plan to double the number of computer science graduates Boise State produces.

Internships are one of the best ways that students can take the skills and competencies they have learned in the classroom and the laboratory and put them to the test in the working world. Boise State places more than 1,300 local interns a year. More than 9 out of 10 Treasure Valley employers told the Boise State Career Center that they expect their entry-level professionals to have had a practical learning experience, such as an internship.

At Metageek and companies all over Boise, these internships can turn into first jobs. But internships are just the start of what Boise State is doing to prepare its graduates for success beyond the diploma, and for good reason.

“When you and I graduated, employer expectations weren’t as high,” said Debbie Kaylor, Career Center director.
IDENTIFYING THE PATHWAYS TO CAREER READINESS

Today, universities see more first-in-their-family college students, a broader access for students from all income levels and a generation of incoming freshmen who have lived through the Great Recession. Many of these students are taking career readiness to heart. Recent studies show that those who don’t may face years of underemployment.

In short, the diploma isn’t enough.

“You can’t just have that piece of paper in hand,” Kaylor said. “I think employers are really looking for a package — it’s your major, it’s your skills, it’s your experiences.”

Undergraduate research can be a boon for future employability.

“I think that students who are involved in research have a leg up on students who are not,” said Dr. Mark Rudin, Boise State’s vice president for research and economic development. “I think from a professional development opportunity, you are learning skills in the laboratory, in the field and in the studio. I think that creates a more well-rounded student and a more competitive student in the workplace.”

Freshmen begin hearing at orientation about other ways they can start to build their resumes. The list is longer than many imagine. Service-learning, which combines classwork with volunteer work

Metageek team members include (left to right) Kevin Phillips, Billy Bowman, Daniel Hampikian, Marianna Budnikova, John Fitzgerald and Ayrton Stout.
or other formal community engagement, builds real-world experience. On-campus jobs can teach (and validate) responsibility while being accessible to even the busiest full-time students. Students who study abroad must develop new relationships and learn self-reliance — both valuable on-the-job skills.

Kaylor said students involved in clubs and organizations learn to lead and handle complex interpersonal relationships, and those who join student professional organizations are exposed to potential mentors and employers.

But whatever experiences students are having in the classroom and beyond, they have to be able to articulate the skills they have learned when they sit down for that first interview.

“We have to teach them how to tell their story,” Kaylor said. “They don’t know how to frame it.”

**EXPERTS SAY THESE SKILLS INDEED PAY THE BILLS**

The headlines are stark:


“The Skills Employers Wish College Grads Had,” Fox Business said a few weeks later.

While college graduates have the skills taught in the major, employers say, they can’t always communicate effectively, solve problems or work in teams.

After hearing the same thing anecdotally, Boise State officials set out to know for sure what was happening in Idaho. They reached out to the premier expert on the topic in the country, Dr. Phil Gardner, The

**NINE BASIC SKILLS** critical to employability

These are the skills identified by the Boise State Career Center and employment expert Dr. Phil Gardner after extensive survey work in Idaho and beyond:

- Analyze, Evaluate and Interpret Information
- Build and Sustain Working Professional Relationships
- Contribute to a Team
- Effectively Communicate Orally
- Manage Time and Priorities
- Perform with Integrity
- Solve Problems
- Take the Initiative
- Think Critically

Brian Tuttle and Ryan Woodings run Metageek, a key player in plans to double the number of Boise State’s computer science graduates.
director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University.

Gardner’s survey of employers prompted Kaylor to redefine and reimagine how the Career Center spoke to Boise State students about their future careers.

“There are a set of skills that you need to be successful,” she said. “We know what those skills are and that they cross majors.”

Gardner again came to Boise this past fall for the first-ever “Treasure Valley Skills Summit,” designed to bring academic, business and government leaders together to find the best ways for the university to meet the needs of local employers.

Unfortunately, Gardner said, there is no “silver bullet” skill for success.

“They come in bundles. They have to be developed and integrated together.”

And building these skills isn’t as easy as just adding another class. “We have to be able to weave whole cloth,” he said.

**TIME TO REIMAGINE CAREER READINESS ON CAMPUS**

The tipping point for Boise State President Dr. Bob Kustra was a study released last year by the New York Federal Reserve.

It showed that many of today’s college graduates were accepting low-wage or part-time jobs for which they were overqualified. He started speaking regularly on the question of career readiness with Rudin and Dr. Martin Schimpf, provost and vice president for academic affairs.

“Too many of our graduates are realizing that the world they are entering is a very different place from the all-too-often solo experience of university studies,” Kustra said. “The world of work is not defined by disciplines.”

The topic became the focus of his State of the University Address in the fall, and shaped how Boise State launched its groundbreaking College of Innovation and Design — a university-wide hub focused on transforming academic programming, learning and research.

“We need to rethink how we validate a student’s education. Employers need to know more than just what a student majored in, and students need experiences that range freely across the disciplines to fully prepare them for careers and life,” Kustra said.

The college is designed to help faculty work across disciplines to both train students for the modern economy and respond to the real-world needs of industry — problems that rarely can be tackled within a single disciplinary silo.

One of the new college’s first goals will be to launch the “Bridge to Career” program. It will augment traditional majors with condensed learning modules that serve as “finishing” experiences and provide Boise State students with a competitive edge in business and technology.

Students in a science major may learn basic accounting, for example, or get a taste of business management. Those who go through these experiences will earn “badges” indicating to employers that they have gained new skills and competencies and better understand how to apply those skills in the workplace.

“Incoming students have to prepare for jobs that may not even exist when they start their freshman year,” Kustra said.

“We know we have to work with business and industry leaders in our community and region to ensure our graduates have the skills they need to flourish in the modern economy. This is why our College of Innovation and Design is so valuable and so important for our future.”