

Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT)
Higher Education and Workforce Development Subcommittee Hearing
Building an AI-Ready America: Strengthening Employer-Led Training
March 4, 2026

(As prepared for delivery)

Artificial intelligence isn't coming in some distant future; it's a tool that businesses are already using every day. Data shows that nearly half of occupations could use AI for at least a quarter of their tasks. That means jobs are evolving in real time.

At the same time, research finds that 44 percent of workers' core skills will change within just five years because of technological advances. That presents enormous opportunity—but only if we prepare for it. America's economic strength depends on whether our workforce is ready to compete and lead in this new era.

So the question is simple: Are we preparing our workers to succeed, or are we letting them fall behind?

The *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* is the foundation of the nation's workforce development system. It provides funding for job training, work-based learning, classroom instruction, and support for adults and youth. But our economy today looks very different than it did when WIOA was last reauthorized in 2014. We have to ask whether the system we built more than a decade ago is equipped for the economy we have today.

Employers are hiring, but nearly 7 million positions remain unfilled. The problem isn't a lack of opportunity, it is a mismatch of skills. More businesses are recognizing that demonstrated ability and real-world competencies matter as much as, or more than, a traditional four-year degree that can leave learners saddled with tens of thousands of dollars in debt.

That's why employer-led training matters.

When businesses are directly involved in designing training programs, we get better outcomes. Many employer-led or employer-involved models allow Americans to earn while they learn. Those models build practical skills tied to real jobs. And they ensure taxpayer dollars produce measurable results.

AI is going to automate some tasks, but it's also going to create new ones.

An AI-ready America won't happen by accident. It will happen when we align training with real job demand, remove barriers to employer participation, and hold programs accountable for results.

Our responsibility is clear: prepare Americans not just for the jobs of yesterday, but for the opportunities of tomorrow.