Employability and the Liberal Arts: A Career Readiness Initiative

by Katherine E. Brown

When discussing the role of higher education as it applies to students, responses often devolve into two opposing camps: one for people who advocate for and defend the role of liberal arts education as basic to the preservation of democracy and freedom, and the other for people who care about the connection between what students learn in classrooms today and how well prepared they are to enter and succeed in their desired careers. But concerns with the employability of our graduates need not be read as an invitation to erode the liberal arts values underpinning public higher education. What purpose is served by serious, committed teachers and scholars adopting a defensive posture in conversations about the employability of our students? We miss important opportunities to make the case for liberal arts, humanities, and public higher education in new ways when we approach the employability conversation defensively.

College Readiness, Career Readiness, and Employability

Higher education faculty, administrators, and staff have made significant commitments and strides in the past decade toward recruiting and retaining undergraduate students from under-served and at-risk populations. Many of us are fortunate to be at campuses with programs designed to encourage college readiness, persistence, and academic success of first-generation college students,

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military veterans, underrepresented, and returning or nontraditional students. We speak the language of “high impact practices,” undergraduates working with faculty in research, community service learning, and the importance of internship courses. We see how these all play a role in keeping students focused in college. Opportunities to connect theory and practice inside and outside the classroom are fertile ground for students to explore post-collegiate next steps. Skills and connections developed in “college readiness” activities also contribute to “career readiness” and employability. Yet, as embattled advocates of public education are navigating the upheavals of what Slaughter and Rhoades refer to as “academic capitalism,” it becomes easy for some faculty to regard any reference to “skills translation” or “career readiness” as a euphemism for feeding the kids into a nameless corporate chipper.

Some reticence to participate in “the employability conversation” may be, for others, based on awareness of the limits of our frames of reference or recent experiences. For faculty who have been exclusively employed in higher education, or those whose last job search was ages ago, this is understandable. The presence of campus career centers with resources, staff, current information, and advice for specific steps and tools useful at various stages of career exploration may lead faculty to assume we have little to add to the conversation. We also know students must seek answers on their own to many questions about their future careers. However, faculty can help students engage and employ their critical thinking, goal formation, and research abilities long before (or after) these students visit a campus career center. Every educator has more to offer than they may realize to help students find connections between the ideas and issues we engage deeply with on our campuses and students’ emerging career interests and goals.

POSSIBILITIES, REWARDS, AND CHALLENGES

This essay offers some possibilities, rewards, and challenges associated with developing assignments, activities, and programs for faculty seeking to showcase and expand the ways we prepare students for post-college life. It begins with reclaiming or discovering the everyday opportunities we have to help students articulate what they can bring to the table as members of any organization. This question connects the employability conversation to a tenet of the National...
Education Association (NEA) mission “to help students succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.” Success is broadly defined, but for many it likely includes finding a “fit” between our values, skills and abilities, and the goals, needs, culture, and practices of an employer. Many possibilities flow from reflecting on how we encourage students to connect what they are learning in our classrooms to planning their next steps after college. Some rewards include seeing students confidently making a case for what they have to offer organizations of interest to them, taking initiative, and developing and claiming a professional voice of their own in communicating with new audiences inside and outside academe.

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Among the challenges are these: How and where may educators play a role in helping students talk about their ideas, goals, and abilities to people who are not their teachers, peers or others inside the discourse of an academic discipline and campus environment? What does such a role require of faculty in terms of thought and action? The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) publishes an annual list of the top 10 skills that surveyed employers seek from college graduates. Many of the skills ranked highly year after year are practiced in our classrooms and other campus learning environments every day, including the ability to “verbally communicate inside and outside the organization,” to “work in a team structure,” to “obtain and process information,” and to “make decisions and solve problems.” Consider this: if a student’s interest in social justice, conservation, public policy, or child development leads to his or her seeking employment in a non-profit organization, in public service or teaching, mere “interest” and a resume alone won’t land a job for which there are many qualified, committed applicants. While many faculty can easily articulate the connections between what we teach and the benefits to non-profit or for-profit organizations of hiring our graduates, we will not be at the job interview. Students must be able to make the case for themselves. Long before that interview moment, students need practice demonstrating their soft skills and answering the question: “Why me for this opportunity at this organization at this time?”

Faculty can help students recognize the importance of soft skills developed inside and outside the classroom long before their senior year or first job interview. We can access the wisdom and talent in our networks of alumni, former students, area professionals and supporters of the humanities and liberal arts who populate many career fields. The professional staff and administrators we interact with every day, in career centers, offices of service learning, and community engage-
ment, are also excellent resources for making contacts for guest lectures, panel events, mentoring, and other opportunities for conversation and networking for students.

**SKILLS TRANSLATION IN CONTEXT AND COURSEWORK**

Once a year, I teach a course I designed over a decade ago as a faculty member in the Communication Department at CSU San Marcos. This course lends itself to adaptation by a variety of departments and programs. I offer this description of it as an example of how to resist the tendency to portray any concern with employability as somehow anti-intellectual, or as a rejection of the ideals and traditions of liberal arts education.

The course begins with a series of professional communication exercises. Any instructor can find available textbooks with exercises of this type. Students learn (or review) the basic elements, conventions, and genres of professional writing such as letters, e-mail and memos, and reports and proposals. They practice audience-centered communication in oral presentations demonstrating application of these skills, and they also learn collegial ways to offer and receive peer feedback on presented work. For example, a student might be tasked with composing and presenting a letter that responds to an inquiry of a particular type. Her peers’ feedback to that presentation will attend to word choice, tone, and inclusion of pertinent details. Where some students assume at first that there is one correct way to write such a letter and one correct way to interpret it, the limits of this view soon become apparent. Each student reflects on the feedback received, and then decides what to incorporate and what to disregard, relative to her goals and information provided about the context, the task and her own interpretation of its nuances. Students learn clarity and concise writing, the importance of revising drafts, and proofreading. Students at any level can benefit from these exercises, and many have had some practice with these forms in high school or freshman year in college, but students who are preparing to communicate with new audiences, conducting career research or working with a mentor often take such activities more seriously.

Next, students write a curriculum-reflective essay about ideas and experiences abiding in memory from their major coursework. I want students to be

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able to answer those basic questions posed to them by friends, family and potential employers or mentors about why they chose their majors, and what they’ve learned. This activity helps prepare students to explain the contribution their studies have made to their toolkits for living.

Martha Nussbaum’s book *Cultivating Humanity: A Classic Defense of Reforms in Higher Education* speaks of three capacities cultivated by a good liberal arts education: (1) critical self-reflection, (2) being a citizen of the world, and (3) the narrative imagination. Her second book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, further explores the importance to democracy itself of privileging the

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creative, critical, imaginative aspects of the humanities and liberal arts, resisting the pull of efficiency and profit motives.

The related assignment in the course I am discussing here is to write a paper reflecting on coursework, connections between the student learning outcomes for the major, and Nussbaum’s ideas. It’s worth noting the vitality of these ideas in many fields and disciplines. Gregory Petsko wrote an open letter to the president of SUNY Albany in 2010, characterizing that executive’s decision to eliminate several programs in languages and the arts as a “Faustian Bargain.” Petsko, a professor of biochemistry, celebrated the crucial role studying languages, art, and literature has played in his own career, and in advancing recognition in all fields that what we often think of as problems of only one place, moment or people can be found elsewhere in the record of human history and experience.

The third text I use in this course is a novel, in keeping with Nussbaum’s advocacy of the importance of the “narrative imagination.” Many novels, films, plays, poems, or other texts explore individual choices, interpersonal relations, and the institutional and societal power dynamics playing out in workplaces. Students explore how fictional representations of work, workplaces and characters came to be as they are and where they are, what the people in the story want from their lives, and whose values are served or are in conflict in a novel. I am confident readers of *Thought & Action* can easily generate a list of novels, films, or other texts exploring how the concerns of their academic disciplines play out in fictional depictions of work and workplaces. Any number of discipline-specific research, writing, and speaking assignments around this topic could be constructed to align with course learning objectives. These reflections (on curriculum, on depictions of work and workers) can easily accompany the professional skills exercises. They also complement other course assignments, such as writing a career research paper, conduct-
ing informational interviews with professionals, and writing reflection papers on what students learn from these interviews relative to their own goals. Thus, there are many ways faculty might engage with the employability conversation without abandoning our disciplinary objectives and values of public higher education.

**INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

Small departments and programs may not have the resources to offer such a course regularly. One solution is for faculty to include career exploration, professional writing, analysis of representations of work, or interview assignments in existing courses. Another is to offer an interdisciplinary or college-wide version of such a course for students from several majors to do both common and individualized assignments linking career exploration to their programs of study.

In 2013, the dean of CSU San Marcos’ College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences launched a Career Readiness Initiative. I am the faculty director of this initiative. Several administrators, faculty, staff, students and engaged community members have participated in activities to cultivate career readiness among our students. Without the pre-professional support often associated with careers such as nursing or teaching, liberal arts students with many career possibilities to explore can benefit from structured opportunities to inquire about particular paths. In talking with students about these paths, faculty can engage in a dialogue about skills translation.

In the first two years of the initiative, contingent and tenured faculty alike from half a dozen programs and departments in our college volunteered to showcase their career readiness-related practices in teaching and other work at our campus faculty center. We also have organized a series of panels on different employment sectors (non profit, public, etc.) in which professionals reflect on how they formed their career paths and how, specifically, students from liberal arts and humanities backgrounds might explore these careers. These panels offer deeper kinds of engagement for students than interactions typically possible at a large campus-wide job fair, namely opportunities to discuss the connections between college majors and career paths. We also have benefited from strengthened connections between faculty and career center staff. In addition, we began a new Career Mentoring Network for Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences
majors, pairing volunteers (area professionals, alumni and campus professional staff) with students.12

On another level, collaborative work among several units across campus has contributed to the creation of an Office of Internships to inform and support community members, students and faculty who seek to expand student participation in internships. Finally, we are preparing a pilot adaptation of the course structure I described earlier in this essay to serve those students and faculty in departments and programs currently not able to offer such a course.

We are at different stages in achieving the goals of each of these efforts as we move out of an “initiating” phase into fostering a culture of career readiness in our college. Hopefully, readers of this journal may be encouraged to reexamine and reframe the notion that the employability conversation is outside the immediate concerns of those safeguarding the great traditions of public higher education. It is important to remember some students have access to models for building a career path versus getting a job. Some have contacts who can help them gain access and navigate occupational and professional routines and cultures, while others do not. We understand this when we work to build ladders and pipelines to higher education. But we also must understand this when we relate to our students’ transition from our campuses into occupational and professional routines, cultures and networks. A career readiness initiative offers another way faculty, students, staff, and friends may work together to mitigate inequities and the consequences of uneven access to resources and information. This approach to thinking about the “employability of our graduates” advances the cause of strengthening public education.

ENDNOTES

1. From Thought & Action’s Call for Papers for a Special Focus for Fall 2015: “The Greeks and Romans saw the liberal arts as the tools necessary to make a person free. But some students and many policymakers today more likely see public higher education as a means simply to make people employable.”


3. Slaughter and Rhoades offered an analysis of the emergence of several intertwined developments they refer to as “academic capitalism” in Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, the State and Higher Education.


6. Ibid, figure 1, NACE Employers rate the skills/qualities sought in new college hires.


9. Petsko’s Open Letter to George M. Phillips was published in Genome Biology.

10. See Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity chapter 3, for description of how the narrative imagination allows one to “to be an intelligent reader of another person’s story.”

12. I wish to thank and acknowledge Dr. Adam Shapiro, dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences at CSUSM; Dr. Darlene Piña, associate professor of sociology and co-developer/co-administrator of the Career Mentor Network, and the students, faculty, staff, panelists, mentors, sponsors and friends engaged in the programs and activities of the Career Readiness Initiative. Thanks to my “Power Writer” colleagues for their encouragement to submit this article.

W O R K S C I T E D


