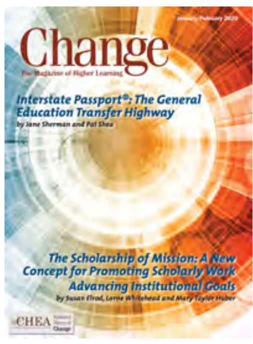

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Reframing Student Employability: From Commodifying the Self to Supporting Student, Worker, and Societal Well-Being

By Matthew T. Hora, Rena Yehuda Newman, Robert Hemp, Jasmine Brandon, and Yi-Jung Wu

In Short

- The employability discourse argues that the ability of college graduates to find employment is entirely dependent on their own dedication to acquiring in-demand skills that can be sold in the labor market.
- The theoretical foundation of employability is based on three ideas: skills are *human capital* to sell in the marketplace, *personal responsibility* is valued over social safety nets, and *soft skills* are easy to teach and learn.
- Such a perspective on job acquisition is contradicted by ample evidence of the critical roles that labor market structure, hiring discrimination, personal circumstances, social connections, and economic trends play in determining whether or not someone can get a job.
- Some in-demand skills, such as intercultural competency, are neither easy to teach nor learn and require attention to critical consciousness of structural inequities in society and the labor market.
- Colleges and universities should reject the employability discourse and instead invest in the instructional infrastructure to enhance student skills, embody fair labor practices at their own institutions, and advocate a vision of higher education that accounts for vocational, social justice, and intellectual goals.

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We are in a cultural moment where a college education is widely viewed by students, parents, policy makers, and institutions in terms of a metric commonly found in financial markets—that of a return on investment (ROI). The "return" is the jobs, salaries, and careers of graduates. At the center of this vocational turn in higher education is a single idea shaping debates about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and institutional accountability around the world—student employability.

While debate continues about how to define and measure employability, most accounts revolve around a deceptively simple idea—whether or not a person obtains a job depends on their acquiring certain skills and attributes in college that are desired by employers in the labor market. The narrative advanced by this perspective raises two critical questions that are increasingly pressing for postsecondary leaders: (a) How can colleges and universities cultivate employability in their students? and (b) How can institutions measure and prove their students' employability to policy makers and taxpayers?

To answer these questions, it is essential to recognize growing critiques in countries such as Australia and England about the notion of employability itself (Clarke, 2018; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). These critiques tend to coalesce around objections that getting a job is not simply a matter of a student acquiring the "right" skills and credentials, and that the overly simplistic employability discourse is based on a deeply flawed argument about the causal relations among students, higher education, and the labor market.

In a new course in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW–Madison), we examined these questions and critiques over 16 weeks of intense reading, discussion, and debate. The course included readings about different employability frameworks used around the world, historical accounts of theories underlying the construct, and discussions concerning how institutions were applying the idea in practice. We took an especially close look at a family of skills commonly associated with employability—the so-called soft or noncognitive skills such as teamwork and intercultural competency that are ubiquitous in today's discussions about the skills employers seek in college graduates.

To this course we brought a diversity of perspectives and experiences, and at the end of several weeks of reading and debate, we found that a series of questions kept recurring in our discussions:

- Is getting a job really dependent solely on a student acquiring the "right" skills, or are there other forces and factors that need to be part of the employability discourse?
- Does the embrace of ideas such as human capital, personal responsibility, and soft skills have any negative implications for students' education and long-term interests?
- Should colleges and universities not only focus on instilling valued skills in their students, but also advocate for and model fair labor practices that will affect the long-term success and well-being of their alumni?

As the semester progressed, these questions grew so persistent and pressing that one day in the middle of the semester, we began discussing the prospect of ditching the planned final term paper in favor of a collaboratively written article that outlined these questions and advanced a critique of the employability discourse.

This article is a product of that semester of debate about employability and its impact on U.S. higher education. Ultimately, we contend that too many institutions and advocates of employability are unquestioningly (and perhaps unwittingly) adopting a market-based discourse of skills and education that contradicts long-held values associated with higher education and its role in society. And that development, in a time of rising inequality, growing concerns about the health of our democratic institutions, and the precarious nature of the labor market our graduates are entering, is unfortunate if not downright negligent. It, we believe, must be rejected by the higher education community.

Definitions and Frameworks for Employability

One of the first things we discussed in class was the history of the term "employability." Over time, the idea of employability has shifted from an early focus on providing benefits and job training for people with disabilities or recently dislocated workers to a view of employability as an individual's ability to manage and enhance their own career prospects and professional well-being (Gazier, 2001).

This ultimately resulted in a perspective called "initiative employability"—where a student's ability to get a job upon graduation is largely (if not exclusively) due to their own initiative and the technical (i.e., "hard" skills) and inter- and intrapersonal competencies (i.e., "soft" skills) that they have acquired over time. This interpretation of employability is evident in the ubiquitous lists of "skills employers want" that are regularly promulgated by the media and organizations such as the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), whose list of eight "career readiness" competencies have had an outsized influence on administrators and career counselors (NACE, 2019).

This view of employability as a simple matter of enterprising college students having the "grit" and initiative to acquire in-demand skills has come under fire for perpetuating an overly simplistic view of job acquisition and for privileging the voices and interests of employers over those of students. These critiques have led to another view of employability called "interactive employability" that is more nuanced and takes into account a variety of factors that dictate an individual's ability to get a job—such as their personal circumstances (e.g., access to transportation), employers' hiring criteria, and external "demand-side" factors such as economic and political conditions (see McQuaid & Lindsey, 2005).

However, most analysts agree that a supply-side, skills-focused view of employability is ascendant not only in political circles but is also embraced by higher education leaders around the world. This narrative—what we have called the "skills discourse" (Hora, Smolarek, Martin, & Scrivener, 2019)—acts as a cognitive frame or interpretive device that shapes how people interpret a problem and its solutions. Given this influence, our class spent a considerable amount of time scrutinizing this dominant perspective of (initiative) employability, and the theories and ideas that have provided its basic premises and assumptions.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Employability Discourse

In the skills discourse, the language of "personal responsibility" and "in-demand skills" guides much of the discussion about what colleges and universities should do to make their students more employable. This discursive thread is rooted in specific ideological and theoretical positions about the

> In particular, the skills discourse draws on three influential ideas: human capital theory, the ideology of personal responsibility, and a view of 'soft' skills as commodities with value in the marketplace.

relationships among capital, labor, and education. In particular, the skills discourse draws on three influential ideas: human capital theory, the ideology of personal responsibility, and a view of "soft" skills as commodities with value in the marketplace.

Premise #1: Human Capital: Investments in Skills Yield Returns in the Labor Market

One of the most influential theories in social science in the 20th century was that of human capital. Developed at the Chicago School of Economics by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz in the 1960s, human capital theory asserts that investments in a person's skills, education, and knowledge will provide financial returns in the marketplace. In contrast to traditional theories of capital that refer to financial resources or modes of production (e.g., land, equipment) that could produce profits for employers, Becker and colleagues ushered in a paradigm shift by arguing that an individual's skills and knowledge represent a form of capital that could yield returns in the form of productivity and wage growth.

Q3

Besides altering how we think about the nature of capital and its role in the marketplace, human capital theory also reshaped how students and workers think of themselves. As anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli (2008) observed, college students have come to reimagine themselves and their college experience as "the summation of commodifiable bits" of skill to "sell" in the labor market (p. 211).

This rhetorical shift has real consequences. Students begin to see themselves and their education as commodities with varying degrees of value in the labor market (and, given the rising costs of tuition, students have good reason to view their education in terms of ROI). In addition, policy makers, higher education leaders, and media observers tend to begin and end their discussions of employability (and the purpose of higher education) with lists of generic skills or career competencies (e.g., NACE, 2019), perpetuating the (mistaken) view that college graduates' job prospects and their future successes are largely dependent on acquiring these essential skills.

Finally, human capital theory contains an implicit nod to the idea of meritocracy, wherein success accrues to those who demonstrate grit, intelligence, character, and motivation to go out and "invest in themselves." According to this narrative, well-paying jobs and social mobility will be awarded exclusively on the basis of merit and diligence—a core idea underlying the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mythology in U.S. culture. But this assumption raises another question that highlights the second premise underlying the employability discourse: Who should bear the risks and costs associated with pursuing the American Dream?

Premise #2: Personal Responsibility and the Shift of Risks to the Student

The next premise underlying the employability discourse involves personal responsibility and the subsequent shift of costs and risks associated with getting (and keeping) a family-supporting job from employers and the state to the individual. The notion of personal responsibility is a familiar one in American politics, as many have argued that a key to solving intractable problems such as homelessness and poverty is simply for people to work harder, take more responsibility for their situations, and to cease an unhealthy reliance on government for "handouts."

One of the keys to this conception of social mobility is that education, whether it be that first credential for a high school graduate or "up-skilling" by adult workers, is essential to get ahead; it also is the responsibility of the individual to pursue and finance their own postsecondary education. Thus, to be competitive in today's economy, people must show initiative and, on their own time and dime, take responsibility for their own lives, go to school, get a diploma, degree, or other credential, and then success will be in reach.

While motivation, hard work, and persistence are certainly important ingredients for students to thrive in college, it is clear that substantial support systems are also needed to enable someone to

attend college and earn a degree: funds to pay for tuition, books, groceries and housing, childcare, health care, and so on. This is especially the case for the growing numbers of college students who are working adults juggling multiple family and work-related responsibilities. Yet, over time, the price of college tuition has substantially increased as government funding for public higher education has plummeted, thereby shifting costs from the state to individual students and workers.

The political scientist Jacob Hacker (2019) has characterized this development as the "Great Risk Shift," with the individual bearing more and more responsibility for their own education, retirement, health care, and job training. It was not always like this. In the not too distant past, governments more generously funded public higher education, employers provided more support for tuition assistance, pensions and health care, and people could count on a social safety net in case of personal emergencies or economic downturns.

But this is no longer the case, and advocates of the employability discourse continue to urge students to demonstrate initiative and keep on up-skilling themselves as "lifelong learners" without acknowledging or addressing the fact that the economic landscape has dramatically changed. And, as students take out more loans and exhibit their personal responsibility by pursuing an education, they are being urged to not only study the technical aspects of a discipline or profession, but also to acquire a class of skills and competencies—that of the "soft" skills.

Premise #3: Students Should Acquire "Soft" Skills to be Competitive in the Labor Market

The third premise underlying the employability discourse is that of soft skills—where the theory of human capital and exhortations about personal initiative come together. Consider this recent headline—"Mark Cuban's Advice for Recent Graduates: Your Soft Skills are More Important Than Coding." Such a perspective underscores what has become a recurrent mantra in higher education—that students lack soft skills, and therefore colleges and universities need to redouble efforts to ensure that their graduates have stronger communication, critical thinking, and teamwork skills.

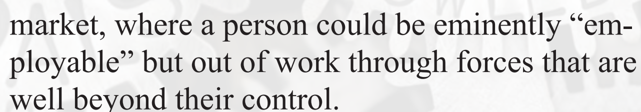
Why are these skills, which are widely seen as distinct from the discipline-specific content of a profession or degree program, so important? Surveys of employers have long featured complaints that graduates are entering the workforce lacking these skills, and the voices and interests of the marketplace carry considerable weight in the employability discourse. Additionally, anxiety over the changing nature of work has also been a longstanding reason to emphasize soft skills, primarily because robots ostensibly will not be able to replace humans entirely given the unique human capacity for empathy or creative problem solving.

But what is discouraging about most discussions of soft skills is the almost complete lack of attention on how difficult it is to actually teach these complex competencies and how they are deeply embedded in and shaped by family and friends, the broader culture, and specific professions and race, gender, and social class. Further, the employability discourse advances a monetized view of these skills, so much so that skills such as critical thinking that were once seen as a fundamental aspect of a liberal arts education with benefits accruing to society and the individual graduate are now discussed primarily in terms of their value in the marketplace.

Reframing the Debate: Focusing on Social Change *and* Students' Long-Term Well-Being

As our course began to wind down, we found that we agreed with the growing focus on students' future careers and employment, and that attention to the vocational aspects of a college education was important, and in some cases long overdue. And we understood the political pressure facing institutional leaders around the world to address the rhetoric and concerns about the ROI of a college degree. But our agreement with these elements of the employability discourse was tempered by the fact that we strongly felt that the current debate was illogical, ignored the upheavals of our current sociopolitical climate, and overlooked the long-term well-being of students throughout their entire working lives.

The first signal that our class would find the concept of employability problematic was the taken-for-granted storyline about the nature of job acquisition that defied common sense and the research literature. This story advanced the notion that skills, credentials, and personal initiative alone dictate whether or not a student gets a job. This almost humorous fiction ignores so many other factors that influence a person's fortunes in a capricious labor



market, where a person could be eminently "employable" but out of work through forces that are well beyond their control.

In our class, we kept returning to two issues that students will confront upon graduation that the employability discourse completely ignores—an increasingly uncertain and turbulent job market and the global increase in inequality and White nationalism.

By many measures—especially historically low unemployment and ubiquitous stories about rising employer demand for workers—the economy of 2019 is vibrant, healthy, and promising for students graduating from our nation's colleges and universities. But a number of warning signs complicate this picture. Each year the gap between the richest 1% and the rest of society grows, student loan debt continues to rise and suffocate the aspirations of many young people, and the working poor and middle-class struggle with rising costs of living and stagnant wages in cities across the country.

Moreover, and perhaps most troubling for college students, the "gig" economy and occupations paying less than $34,000 a year represent some of the fastest growing segments of the labor market. As one of the prominent features of what some call "Late Capitalism," gig or contract labor includes relatively low-wage, no-benefit, and temporary jobs that have little to no prospects for job security. Work in this sector includes adjunct or temporary lecturers in higher education, Uber or Lyft drivers, freelance work, and a panoply of jobs that by some estimates includes 10% of the U.S. workforce (Shambaugh, Nunn, & Bauer, 2018). And as a form of self-driven entrepreneurialism, the gig economy is a perfect (and unfortunate) instantiation of the premises of personal responsibility and risk shift discussed earlier.

Consequently, we need to acknowledge as an unequivocal fact that today's college students will be graduating into a labor market that is radically different and more unsettled than the one many faculty and institutional leaders encountered when they graduated from college. Today, pensions, benefits, and job security are becoming increasingly rare—the veritable unicorn of employment for job seekers. For us, this raises the question about what our postsecondary institutions can and should do for students—beyond working to help them secure that first job after graduation—such as advocating for the long-term well-being of their alumni, who will soon be negotiating this difficult terrain of precarious work and rising inequality.

The other fact that we argue must be part of the national conversation about higher education and student employability is the global rise of inequality and racist rhetoric and policymaking at the highest levels of government. It is no exaggeration to state that our society is in tumult, with the social and political geography of the United States changing in often violent ways. It is in times like these that our society so desperately needs a generation of citizens, thinkers, and leaders who grasp that intolerance and xenophobia are antithetical to a healthy democratic society where opportunity truly exists for all.

Yet, at too many campuses, insufficient attention is being paid to the role that student skills and competencies may play not only in getting them a job but in affecting social change. Take the example of a "soft" skill that is included in many lists of skills that employers seek—intercultural competency—which is seen as essential in an increasingly globalized and diverse workplace. Institutional responses to the importance of intercultural competencies frequently revolve around well-meaning yet limited efforts, such as ethnic studies coursework. Indeed, courses such as Anthropology 101 may be the first exposure for many White students to the culture of a non-White group and to the history (and perpetuation) of discriminatory policies in our country.

But in many cases, these courses are missed opportunities in truly affecting changes in the way that White students think about privilege and social change. For instance, many ethnic studies courses at predominantly White institutions are taught by White professors and risk treating the idea of intercultural competency in a superficial fashion. For some students of color, these courses are more an exercise in assuaging White guilt and/or a matter of providing White students with marketable skills, instead of facilitating what Paulo Freire (1973) called "critical consciousness" or the ability of students to recognize systems of inequality and to intervene and disrupt such systems. In fact, some students of color at UW–Madison report feeling that they and non-White cultures are discussed in the classroom in terms of their inherent value with respect to White culture and history, as if that should be questioned in the first place. As one student of color reflected, "It's traumatic—[we] have to come to class every day to convince other students that we are human beings" (Murad, 2018).

Given the fact that students are graduating into a world with not only a changing workplace but also one where hiring discrimination persists and racism is normalized by leaders around the world, we argue that fostering critical consciousness in today's college students, and not just a marketable form of 'cultural tolerance,' should be one of the primary goals of our postsecondary institutions.

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It is within these contexts that we argue that the current narrative of student employability—as the imperative for students to invest in their own human capital—be soundly rejected by faculty, staff, and leaders of our institutions. Instead, we offer three ways forward to shift the narrative from one of commodifiable skills to one that focuses on social change and the long-term well-being of our students, who will become the workers of the future.

1. *Invest in the difficult work of cultivating students' skills by training (and paying) all faculty*. One of the most pernicious aspects of the "soft" skills label is the implication that they are mushy and easy to teach and learn (Hora, Benbow, & Smolarek, 2018). Professional educators and learning scientists have long known that this view is patently false and that skills like critical thinking or intercultural competency are immensely difficult to teach and master. They simply cannot be picked up in a 2-hour workshop or acquired by osmosis in Anthropology 101.

   Instead, we need to invest in a more careful and deliberate design of courses and cocurricular experiences that take the work of teaching skills such as teamwork or communication more seriously. Such investments should begin with training and ongoing professional development for faculty in topics such as instructional design, learning theory, and culturally responsive pedagogy. For a profession that inexcusably continues to ignore formal pedagogical training as part of graduate education, involvement in rigorous professional development is essential. Furthermore, to adequately teach difficult and fraught skills like critical consciousness requires considerable self-reflection and training, so that instructors come to understand the flaws with the employability discourse. Instead, a more accurate and equitable approach requires an appreciation of the fact that getting a job looks different for marginalized students who will likely have multiple obstacles to overcome in contrast to wealthy White students whose barriers to employment may be far lower.

And the necessity of providing professional development (and ongoing support) for postsecondary educators raises another issue that colleges must address—to cease the reliance on an underpaid, overworked, and under-trained workforce for classroom instruction (i.e., adjunct or contingent faculty). This is an issue that threatens to jeopardize the quality of student learning but also points to an area where colleges and universities are unfortunately one of the major players in the "gig" economy instead of active advocates for worker protections and the long-term viability of academic careers.

2. *Prepare students with a range of skills and strategies to deal with the 21st-century labor market*. Career services offices at many institutions are enjoying a renaissance with an infusion of institutional resources and interest as student employability and work-related "high-impact practices" like internships become a campus-wide concern. As a result, the days of simply holding résumé-writing workshops and career fairs are becoming a thing of the past. Some of these newly expanded offices offer a variety of online tools for job searching and portfolio building, a bevy of workshops on job search strategies, networking opportunities, and more customized advising services.

However, while a modernized view of career services is a welcome change, we argue that colleges and universities cannot stop there. They need to more explicitly prepare their students for some of the less rosy, and sometimes overtly hostile, aspects of job seeking. For instance, researchers have documented that hiring discrimination on the basis of race, gender, age, language, and body type continues to be widespread. A subtle but equally exclusionary practice is hiring for "cultural fit," where hiring managers screen applicants to "fit" their corporate culture and existing workforce (Hora, 2019).

These realities make it clear that perpetuating the myth of meritocracy and personal initiative is no longer tenable for postsecondary institutions. Instead, colleges need to embed critical consciousness frameworks throughout the curriculum, so that all students, but especially those who graduate into positions of power and influence, can begin to shape structures of opportunity that are more equitable and non-racist. Additionally, providing resources and opportunities for students from historically marginalized groups to flourish in today's labor market, such as subsidies for internships in non-profit organizations or workshops on recognizing the signs of (and strategies for dealing with) discriminatory hiring practices, are clearly warranted and should be institutional priorities.

Another set of realities that students should be prepared for pertains to the problem of risk shift, wherein the prospects of receiving a pension and health benefits are increasingly unlikely for today's graduates. Instead, career services and faculty should also educate students about the pros and cons of the gig economy, the history of unions and basic labor rights, how to advocate for themselves in the labor market, and personal finance courses and resources—all important tools for dealing with a difficult climate for workers.

3. *Colleges need to embody principles of cultural competence and fair labor practices*. Telling our students about the challenges of and inequalities in the labor market is clearly insufficient. Perhaps the most important step that higher education can take in demonstrating its commitment to the well-being of its students is to embody principles of cultural competence and fair labor practices. Unfortunately, this is too rarely the case.

To truly embody a commitment to diversity and intercultural competencies, institutions need to move beyond diversity task forces and implicit bias workshops. While these steps are important, embedding a commitment to critical consciousness across the curriculum has the potential to be truly transformative for students and teachers alike. And as more institutions engage with the employer community to forge college–workforce pathways, it is also incumbent on higher education to take this opportunity to advocate for non-discriminatory hiring practices—something that remains all too common.

In addition, colleges and universities can and should more actively advocate for worker rights for their students and alumni. Postsecondary institutions can refuse to post unpaid internship positions, improve the salary and benefits for contingent faculty, and advocate for worker rights and protections. If more higher education institutions used their clout to advocate for

graduates as the workers of the future, a coalition of schools could begin to stem the tide of shifting risks onto students and begin to restore the role of the state and employers in providing health care, security, and ongoing training for its citizens and employees.

Ultimately, our experience in this course led to a renewed commitment to seeing higher education as a venue for personal, scientific, and societal transformation. Indeed, as students and staff at a university that prides itself on encouraging the "continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found," we consider ourselves to be the latest in a long line of scholars dedicated to service, learning, and advocacy for the health and well-being of all of society. And standing in the way of realizing this vision is the ubiquitous, influential, and fatally flawed idea of student employability. C

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