Re-thinking Soft Skills and Student Employability: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education

Matthew T. Hora, Ross J. Benbow & Bailey B. Smolarek

Published online: 28 Nov 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

View Crossmark data

Re-thinking Soft Skills and Student Employability:

A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education

By Matthew T. Hora,
Ross J. Benbow,
and Bailey B. Smolarek

Matthew T. Hora is an Assistant Professor of Adult and Higher Education and the Director of the Center for Research on College-Work Transitions (http://ccwt. wceruw.org/) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research and teaching focus on the cultural, organizational, and political forces shaping teaching and learning processes, college-work pathways, and college internship programs.

Ross J. Benbow is an Associate Researcher at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His work focuses on the relationships among teaching and learning, public policy, and cultural transition in domestic and international contexts, with a particular interest in patterns of inequity in colleges and universities.

Bailey B. Smolarek is an Associate Researcher with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her work draws on critical social theories to examine issues of educational equity from both systemic and localized understandings.

Employability skills are being on time, coming to work every day—just the rules of the work force—and soft skills are how you operate, on a personal level, with your supervisors and colleagues.

You think that would be common sense, but common sense is not ingrained. It's not born, it's learned and unfortunately some of the population we have in Milwaukee, because they've not seen that in action before, it doesn't exist for them.

College Administrator, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

We have been debating the purposes of higher education for centuries, yet here we stand at the edge of a new era. Graduate employability has increasingly become the key measure of a college and university's value, the coin of the realm. This focus on the economic returns to education is not just an American trend, as postsecondary leaders all over the world are increasingly preoccupied with proving to skeptical legislators that their students *are* getting jobs after they graduate.

But while policymakers and pundits alike pontificate over which "hot" fields students should pursue, one particular set of skills are at the very heart of debates about employability: the so-called "soft skills." These are the social, attitudinal, and self-regulatory competencies or traits that allow us to communicate effectively, work well with others, and persist in the face of adversity. Based on the notion that the purpose of a college education is primarily (if not solely) to instill in students workplace-ready abilities and that competencies such as teamwork, critical thinking, and communication are especially desired by employers, the *Soft Skills Paradigm*, as we call it, is shaping public perception and education policy around the world. It is no longer a point of much contention; it has become common sense.

We believe that the influential logic of this paradigm, however, is inimical to the long-term interests of the students who trust colleges and universities with their futures. The Soft Skills Paradigm is also detrimental to those in the professions who seek skilled young people proficient in their disciplinary cultures and practices. In this era of growing racial and cultural intolerance, we contend that the Soft Skills Paradigm is also reinforcing the deficit model of achievement in higher education, effectively blaming students for their lack of employability and soft skills while ignoring the structural, cultural, and socio-economic forces that thwart mobility and access.

Like many who have critiqued the expression "soft" skills, we dislike the term, as it implicitly diminishes complex skills like communication or critical thinking as compared to the mastery of disciplinary facts, figures, and concepts. However, our critique does not center on semantics alone. Instead, we focus on how the paradigm reflects a decontextualized and inaccurate vision of human competence as well as the role of learned skill in society and the workplace.

Three aspects of the Soft Skills Paradigm strike us as especially problematic for higher education. First, soft skills are often discussed as generic "bits" of competence, detached from specific disciplinary contexts and social and cultural settings, that can be picked up and uploaded nearly as easily as an iPhone app (Urciuoli, 2008). Second, minoritized students' "lack" of soft skills is frequently cited in educational circles to explain disparities in persistence and completion, reifying the deficit model of student achievement. Third, there is a prevailing assumption that students who acquire soft skills will be virtually assured of a good job after graduation, a view that overlooks problems in the

In Short

- Colleges and universities are increasingly focused on ensuring that their students graduate with skills to become employable, particularly so-called "soft skills" such as communication.

- The Soft Skills Paradigm views skills as generic, context-independent, and simple to teach and learn. It overlooks how normative views of skills are constructed by those in positions of power, often marginalizing notions of skill from minoritized groups.

- In contrast, the Cultural Capital Paradigm views human competency as complex, grounded in professional norms, difficult to teach and learn, and differentially valued depending on the profession and situation.

- The time for a paradigm change is now, and postsecondary institutions should reject the Soft Skills Paradigm for a more nuanced, culturally-grounded perspective.

labor market such as hiring discrimination, wage stagnation, and job quality (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). One of the implications of this focus on students' acquisition of skills while in college is the almost complete lack of attention to other venues in which skills and aptitudes are cultivated, such as the home, a religious organization, or the workplace.

Therefore, the Soft Skills Paradigm strikes us as a misleading depiction of a dizzyingly complex set of issues that is becoming entrenched both in the popular discourse and, increasingly, higher education scholarship and governance. In contrast, our empirical research on academic and workplace skills has revealed that competencies such as communication or teamwork are defined, instilled, used, and rewarded in very different ways by people across institutions and professions.

To better understand these phenomena we turned to another way to think about the issues implicated in these debates about skills, college, and jobs—the *Cultural Capital Paradigm*. The Cultural Capital Paradigm is founded on the notion that human competencies are (1) varied, complex, and interconnected, (2) assigned value in specific social, professional, political, and cultural contexts, and (3) used as gatekeeping mechanisms to include or exclude certain individuals from obtaining prestige and position.

As adherents to the Cultural Capital Paradigm, we are not contesting the notion that the "right" skills can help one get a job. Instead, we stress that these competencies, especially those referred to as "soft skills," can encourage or inhibit success by signaling to others where we come from, where we are going, and whether or not we belong. The ways people interpret these signals are not necessarily logical or reasonable, this paradigm suggests, but are often rooted in specific geographic locales with certain histories and, most importantly, certain inequalities.

It is time for a paradigm shift. The Soft Skills Paradigm must be retired and rejected in favor of a more nuanced, realistic, and humanistic perspective—the Cultural Capital Paradigm. While there is value in efforts to increase the employability of college graduates through targeted skills-training and assessment efforts (Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, & Fancsali 2015; Wolff & Booth, 2017), we argue that the conversation about students' employability and skills itself needs to be changed. We begin here by outlining our perspective in more detail.

A New Approach for Thinking about College Students' Skills and Employability: The Cultural Capital Paradigm

As you walk through a college or university, talking to students, faculty and administrators, and closely observe classroom teaching and learning taking place, culture becomes palpable. It is a living, breathing thing, a critical factor in how education works or does not work. It influences how faculty teach their courses, how institutions change (or not), and how students acquire, practice, and reinforce skills they will use the rest of their lives. The unspoken assumptions, routines, and structures that govern cultural life

in postsecondary institutions also apply to the workplace, where culture is manifest in company dress codes, how people treat one another, and the physical layout of the shop floor or laboratory.

When we first began investigating how employers in Wisconsin thought about and evaluated important skills during the hiring process, it quickly became clear that the skills-related challenges facing higher education and the business community was not solely a structural issue, as is commonly believed, but one of cross-cultural relations. In following student paths from colleges into careers, we realized that we needed to think differently about how valued skills taught in one kind of setting—the academy—were being interpreted in another, much different kind of setting—the workplace. For instance, in one manufacturing firm we heard that a crucial requirement for new hires was that they "fit" the company culture—in this case, that translated into fitting a workplace primarily comprised of young, white, snowmobile loving males.

In our new project—the Exploring Multiple Postsecondary Opportunities through Workforce and Education Research project (http://www.empowerstem.com/#), with our colleagues at the Rochester Institute of Technology we are investigating these issues by studying how students, faculty, and employers in fields such as nursing and petroleum engineering conceptualize, teach, and assign value to professional skills. The problem we are addressing is effectively one of translation: how could the communication skills a student learned in a small Midwestern teaching college, for example, transfer to the corporate headquarters of a large, Texas-based energy firm?

We turned to the idea of *cultural capital*, formulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986), to better understand this process. The idea originated in part through Bourdieu's work on French schooling, where he observed that success was not simply the product of hard work and academic skill. Instead, teachers and school leaders handed out rewards for tastes, attitudes, and behaviors that marked certain groups of students—usually those from the middle and upper classes—rather than others, that, practically-speaking, had nothing to do with academic prowess. For Bourdieu, this favoritism represented the primary means through which society's rich and powerful remained so from generation to generation: by portraying *their* tastes, attitudes, and behaviors as more logical, as more sensible, than all others'.

This perspective, of course, emphasizes the cultural aspects of skills and focuses attention on how skills are defined, taught, and developed within different groups of people for different reasons. It also highlights the fact that skills are dispositions and traits to be used in political and familial settings, with colleagues and partners, that are only as valuable as they are appropriate for the social and cultural context. Whether it is more appropriate to greet your prospective employer with "dude," "good morning," or "nǐn hǎo," for example, depends on whether you're hoping to work in a surf shop in Pismo Beach, a corner office on Park

TABLE 1. COMPARING THE PARADIGMS

The Soft Skills Paradigm	The Cultural Capital Paradigm
How skills are conceptualized and learned	
* Skills are either "hard" and "cognitive," meaning difficult and rigorous, or "soft" and "non-cognitive," meaning easier and undemanding	* Human competencies are not inherently easy or difficult, simple or complex, or valuable or valueless
*Teaching and pedagogy are overlooked	*Teaching students skills takes pedagogical expertise and training in the technical knowledge and cultural norms of a discipline
How skills are related to situation, context, and practice	
*Soft skills are generic, discrete, context-free, and universally applicable	*Skills are context-dependent, culturally determined, and subjectively valued
*Soft skills are easily obtainable, via short workshops or college courses	*Skills and dispositions are internalized through long periods of enculturation and socialization
How power, diversity and exclusion are related to skills debates	
*Skills discourses are innocent and objective	*Skills discourses reflect power, social and cultural position
*Student interests are best served by instilling skills that allow them to meet employer demands in the short-term	*Student interests are best served by instilling disciplinary expertise *and* diverse forms of social and cultural capital.
*The acquisition of technical expertise and soft skills leads to employment	*Job market trajectories are determined by merit, social networks, business cycles, structural inequality, and discrimination

Avenue, or a manufacturing firm in Qingdao. When a simple verbal salutation can so easily be seen as both an asset and a liability, imagine the intricacies and nuance necessary to assess human communication with its varying postures, tones, and performed cadences as it occurs in everyday social life.

This is one reason why the discourse surrounding the Soft Skills Paradigm troubles us. It ignores issues of culture, context, and power, stripping away the texture and nuance that necessarily defines how human competencies are perceived and used in daily life. Our suggested Cultural Capital Paradigm, we argue, is a much more accurate and appropriate way to think about students' skills and their relationship to society and the workplace. To make clear how and why the two paradigms differ, we compare them along three dimensions (Table 1, above): how skills are conceptualized and learned; how skills are related to situations, contexts, and practices; and how power, diversity, and exclusion are implicated in the skills discourse.

HOW SKILLS ARE CONCEPTUALIZED AND LEARNED

In recent years, the use of the terms "hard" and "soft" to refer to human ability have become ubiquitous. These terms reflect a particular hypothesis about human competence that bifurcates social skills—often thought of as undemanding, natural, effeminate, even *mushy*—from technical skills—thought of as complex, serious, masculine, and difficult to master. One set of skills evokes the idea of children playing or things one should learn in kindergarten, the other suggests

sweat, furrowed brows, demanding material or technique, and business.

A similar dichotomy exists between the increasingly popular terms "non-cognitive" and "cognitive" skills. Widely used in labor economics, the term non-cognitive refers to aptitudes such as leadership, self-regulation, and conscientiousness that are not easily measured through traditional intelligence assessments (i.e. IQ tests). More recently, the construct has gained widespread attention via the work of Nobel Laureate James Heckman (e.g. Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006), who has argued that non-cognitive skills can predict individuals' social, academic, and labor market outcomes. While the term "non-cognitive" has not been characterized as simplistically as "soft skills," critics of the construct have pointed out that referring to certain skills as bereft of cognition is, if anything, disparaging to competencies like communication and teamwork.

Still, the Soft Skills Paradigm's depiction of human competency as falling into one of two categories isn't just a taxonomic issue. It influences student learning experiences across all educational levels. Consider how this discourse and a view of soft, non-cognitive skills as simple, discrete, and easily transferable has influenced K–12 education. In districts and schools around the country, a focus on "grit," the persistence and conscientiousness trait popularized by psychologist Angela Duckworth (2016), is shaping everything from hallway inspirational posters to student assessments via "character growth cards."

Here, the idea that grit deficits are *the* primary cause of poor academic performance among low-income students and students of color has been embraced by education reformers, effectively blaming marginalized individuals and communities for systematic inequality. Not only does such a discourse—which also encompasses non-cognitive skills—provide a simplistic and racially biased explanation for social mobility (or a lack thereof), it also conceptualizes skills such as grit and communication as unproblematic to teach, learn, and assess.

The problems are similar in higher education, even if they are not as highly publicized. While skills such as critical thinking and teamwork have long been a focus in colleges and universities, the terms "soft," "non-cognitive," and their close cousin "employability skills" are being increasingly featured in accreditation criteria, institutional mission statements, program and course assessments, and student learning outcomes. Unfortunately, these efforts too often ignore the expertise needed to properly instill such skills in students. The popular notion that these skills are simple, elementary, and easily demarcated, we believe, exacerbates this problem, so much so that few faculty—whether tenure-track or contingent—are trained to integrate these difficult competencies into their content-heavy courses. Instead, there seems to be an assumption that students will somehow internalize these skills by osmosis.

In contrast, the Cultural Capital Paradigm rejects the view that some skills, competencies, traits or abilities are easier or more difficult, simple or complex, than others. While particular skills and aptitudes certainly vary in form and content, the focus is not on their degree of difficulty, but instead on how they are assigned different values in different contexts. Dribbling a soccer ball like Lionel Messi has value in Camp Nou, the home of Barcelona's soccer team, but not so much in Wrigley Field, the home of baseball's Chicago Cubs. As such, the Cultural Capital Paradigm views skills like oral communication, or the mastery of properties governing electrical circuits, on equal terms. Both skills can be seen as a form of social and cultural "currency" that enables a person to obtain position and prestige.

Another key difference with the Cultural Capital Paradigm is how its adherents see learning itself. Instead of ignoring pedagogy altogether or hoping that faculty somehow learn to instill soft skills in their students, the Cultural Capital Paradigm promotes the idea that knowledge and aptitudes are acquired as young people are immersed in specific familial, educational, occupational, and geographic settings. To foster this process in a student is no small feat and requires a skilled professional who understands how to craft learning opportunities that introduce novices into the technical, social, and cultural features of a discipline or profession.

How Skills are Related to Situation, Context, and Practice

The Soft Skills Paradigm gives the impression that skills are generic and context-free, as if it doesn't matter whether we're talking about the nursing or engineering profession, or if the student (or employee) is male or female, rich or poor, Caucasian or African-American, or in rural Texas or Beverly Hills. If you Google "Top 10 Skills Employers Want," you can see the subtle and not-so-subtle ways this plays out in how different firms, advocacy groups, government agencies, and, yes, even colleges and universities, discuss and promote certain skills.

These conversations typically feature lists of skills that employers seek, such as "positivity," "teamwork," "communication," "persistence," or "proving your worth"—all of which are invariably defined (if at all) in generic terms. Consider how the widely cited National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) elicits employers' views on one of the most highly valued skills—communication (NACE, 2017). To their credit, NACE at least breaks communication down into two forms—oral and written—but any further nuance, explanation, or complexity is absent. The assumption, of course, is that these skills are defined and used identically across professional communities, organizations, and individuals.

When we think about the values that influence the college students, faculty, and employers that we speak to in our research, this type of definition makes us wonder: what does this tell us about the specific communication norms that help nurses care for patients and family members, or help workers safely operate an offshore drilling rig and avoid environmental catastrophes and work-related injuries? It does not tell us much.

Finally, the Soft Skills Paradigm obscures the fact that notions of what constitutes "good communication skills" are based on racial, gendered, and class-oriented judgements and "common sense" about what is good, normal, and acceptable. This perspective, we argue, completely ignores that what in one context might be considered normal professional behavior—eye contact, brevity, and a firm handshake—may be offensive in another context.

In contrast, the Cultural Capital Paradigm does not view skills in a vacuum. Instead, learned dispositions are closely tied to the context in which they are defined, acquired, and used. Communication skills, once again, help to illustrate this perspective. The act of communicating with others is profoundly social, and it is strongly tied to cultural norms and the interpersonal dynamics of the individuals involved. In our own research, we have found frequent instances of these varying modes and norms for communication. Perhaps not surprisingly, nurses in a busy emergency room often discussed "good" communication skills in different ways than petroleum engineers on an oil rig. For example, nurses emphasized empathy and the importance of forging emotional connections with patients, even describing ways to structure sentences so as not to assign blame for an illness to a patient or their family.

The perspective that communication is not simply a matter of conveying information, but also a representation of cultural beliefs and epistemological positions for people in specific contexts, is a key idea among scholars who study communication in the disciplines. As these scholars argue,

oral, written, and non-verbal forms of communication are grounded in specific situations and disciplines. In this way, the Cultural Capital Paradigm recognizes that eye contact is not always culturally appropriate, brevity is sometimes perceived as rudeness, and handshakes are not the only way to greet someone.

Moreover, the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all rule to these somewhat superficial forms of communication only serves to demonstrate how complicated and nuanced communication truly is. Because forms of human interaction are culturally constructed and unique to particular times, places, and people, lists that promote certain kinds of skills inherently promote certain groups of people—typically those with wealth and position that give them influence over others.

The Cultural Capital Paradigm also advances the idea that these disciplinary skills and habits of mind are not easily acquired in a weekend workshop or even a single college course. Instead, it takes years for learners to master an array of skills, knowledge, and abilities considered valuable in a profession. Through years of socialization in these settings, people begin to internalize collective ways of knowing, talking, and being, eventually embodying these repertoires without thinking. Bourdieu wrote about how this process takes a considerable amount of time, much like a "muscular physique or a suntan" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

This perspective on learning brings to mind traditional forms of apprenticeship, in which welding novices, for example, learn not only the technical aspects of the welding profession, but also how professional welders talk with clients, interact with other welders, and troubleshoot welding problems. In such an apprenticeship, there are not easily acquired "soft" or "non-cognitive" skills. Instead, there are ways of reasoning, communicating, interacting, and being that allow one to be or not to be a professional welder.

How Power, Diversity, and Exclusion are Related to Skills Debates

One of the least discussed features of the soft skills narrative is that the "voices" or interests shaping the contours of the debate are neither diverse nor reflective of the array of stakeholders implicated in discussions of skills, jobs, and students' futures. As we've noted, the origins of most skills lists are employers—business owners, CEOs, and HR directors who are regularly surveyed about the skills that they feel college students *must* acquire.

As researchers working in the competitive world of academia and employers of many staff ourselves, we understand and appreciate the need to find skilled job applicants who can add productivity, efficiency, and profitability to an organization. Still, the centrality of employer voices raises important questions regarding whose interests higher education is meant to serve. We might agree business needs should be one consideration, but should they trump others who have a stake in the game? What about students' short- and long-term needs, or the needs of society writ large to advance knowledge and sustain a participatory democracy? However one might answer, the back and forth over these

issues should be viewed realistically for what it truly is: a negotiation over whose interests higher education should and will serve.

Lists of generic skills born of the Soft Skills Paradigm are presented as universally applicable standards meant to be followed by students and applicants everywhere. Certain manners of behavior, dress, and social interaction are legitimized and promoted through rewarding students who possess them and imposing them upon on students who do not. Such narratives too often pin the blame for poor academic or workplace outcomes on marginalized students and their communities while at the same time arguing that these students simply need better soft skills education.

Given this reality, we agree with other educators who highlight the need to acknowledge how schools, colleges, and universities act as venues for legitimizing certain forms of skills. We also assert the need to recognize and welcome forms of cultural capital present in non-dominant communities through an asset-oriented lens (Gonzáles, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Paris & Alim, 2017). This means embracing skills and knowledge that have been historically developed within our communities through culturally relevant curricula and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In practice, this could mean drawing on a student's ability to code-switch between two or more languages or emphasizing the value of community knowledge and resources through outreach partnerships. These sorts of approaches not only recognize the value of what *all* students bring to the classroom, but also legitimize that value in a formal school setting.

Furthermore, adherents of the Cultural Capital Paradigm would argue that through its dehumanizing and oversimplified focus on the job market's supply side (college graduates) over its demand side (job quality, hiring), the Soft Skills Paradigm creates the illusion that college students who have properly learned some version of positivity, teamwork, communication, or other employability skills will glide into satisfying jobs soon after graduation. The reality is that a variety of forces such as labor market dynamics, business cycles, and deep structural inequalities influence whether one is hired or not. Hiring discrimination, in particular, is a proven barrier to women and people of color regardless of an applicant's skill level or fit for a particular position, as researchers have demonstrated time and time again (Quillian, Pager, Hexel & Midtbøen, 2017).

Ultimately, the Cultural Capital Paradigm holds that the entire debate surrounding soft skills and student employability is aided and abetted by a lack of recognition that certain voices, assumptions, and interests are determining what constitutes "normal skills" and what students' "best interests" really are. Thus, we suggest that the following question should be considered by all readers of *Change*: Of the various stakeholders involved in higher education—students and their communities, higher education professionals, employers and society writ large—whose interests are best being served by the current focus on soft skills and student employability?

So What? Implications for Postsecondary Leaders

Some readers may notice that we have constructed our argument in ways similar to another piece that argued for a paradigm change in higher education—that of Barr and Tagg's (1995) seminal article on teaching and learning. Barr and Tagg argued that lecture-centric teaching needed to evolve to focus on how best to create engaging venues for student learning. Here, like our predecessors, we sense that higher education is at a turning point and that the road ahead that best meets our students' needs is clear—educators need to reject the Soft Skills Paradigm and its attendant assumptions about skills and employability in favor of a new way of thinking.

We are not going to coin yet another term for these crucial human competencies. With terms like non-cognitive, socio-emotional, employability, and 21st century skills, the field is crowded enough as it is. Instead, we propose a new way to think about human skill, student achievement, equity, and the increasingly important issue of students' job prospects. This new vision is at the heart of our current research projects and the launching of a new applied research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison focused on students' experiences with the transition from college to the workforce (http://ccwt.wceruw.org/).

In conclusion, we offer three recommendations for readers hoping to participate in this paradigm shift from soft skills to a more nuanced and student-centered conception of the relationship among skills, college, and careers.

1. Talk about skills differently: Reframe and resist the terms of the debate

We believe higher education leaders, faculty, and scholars should reject frames of reference based on potent catch-phrases or memes—whether referring to the skills gap, soft skills, non-cognitive skills, or employability skills—as these frames often convey a particularly short-sighted view of the relationship among college, competence, and students' futures. Once they are popularized and internalized, such catch-phrases and memes frame and influence how people think about nature of a problem.

The Soft Skills Paradigm, and the closely linked employability narrative, are certainly potent frames for action—they posit that some skills are soft, easy, and unproblematic to teach and learn. They assume that skills are generic, applicable to all people in all professions in the same way. This perspective also suggests that students are solely responsible for acquiring these skills and once done, a well-paying lifelong career will be theirs. We argue that this worldview is something that the field of higher education should acknowledge and actively resist.

Instead, educators and policymakers should start talking about the teaching and learning implications of what we've called the Cultural Capital Paradigm: namely that human competencies are thoroughly situated in social and cultural dynamics, and that these dynamics can help or hinder students as they try to move into organizations and professions after graduation. We believe faculty and students should be transparently discussing this social reality in the classroom, both to prepare for it but also, more importantly, to discover ways it can be challenged, opposed, and overcome.

2. Invest in the professionals best positioned to cultivate profession-specific skills—the professoriate

Instead of viewing professional skills, knowledge, and dispositions as unproblematic to teach or learn, the Cultural Capital Paradigm suggests that they are slowly and laboriously instilled in novices through careful mentoring and teaching. Despite this, teaching continues to be both under-recognized and undervalued as a potentially powerful asset in preparing students for their future careers. We therefore believe that the field should empower faculty and instructors by providing them with adequate training and professional development in both instructional design and professional skills development.

Ultimately, for college students to truly be prepared with the professional skills employers desperately seek, teacher professionalism will have to be taken much more seriously. This is a challenging prospect considering the number of instructors working on short-term contracts while pay, benefits, and job security dwindle. Real support in this regard requires institutions of higher learning to provide instructors with the time, assistance, and compensation necessary to effectively teach. Institutions can prioritize teaching by finding the resources to hire full-time, teaching-centered instructional positions or providing peer mentorship or community of practice-oriented professional development. Asking an untrained and unsupported adjunct instructor to magically transform a 300-student lecture hall into a group of highly capable, critically thinking engineers is, to put it mildly, unreasonable.

Furthermore, as college campuses become more diverse, the need for cultural competency becomes all the more important. A firm commitment to culturally relevant curriculum and culturally responsive instruction is necessary in order to meet the needs of all learners. This includes believing and appreciating that all students are competent and capable, developing a collaborative, caring, and cooperative learning environment, and anchoring curriculum and instruction in students' lives. If these conditions are met, the teaching of "skills" will be built into the curriculum and instruction in culturally sensitive, disciplinary specific ways that will benefit students much more so than learning about standardized lists of "good" employability skills.

3. Put students' long-term welfare at the heart of the conversation

While the current debate about college, skills, and jobs is ostensibly about enabling students to pay off debt, compete with robots, and earn decent wages, in fact student welfare and opportunity is only tangentially connected to the conversation. Instead, with its focus almost exclusively on employer interests and short-term employment fixes, the

debate paints a picture of people, careers, and society with higher education as an assembly line, students as products, and employers as buyers.

What would happen if we truly put college students—with their boundless futures, dreams, and potential—at the heart of the debate? Then, we would be talking much more seriously about education as a student-centered form of experiential learning, where the slow, careful immersion in a craft, profession, or discipline would help them gain hard won (not soft) socially and culturally relevant skills.

We would also be talking about the skills students would need to participate in and maintain a pluralistic democracy, what they would need to know about civic engagement and the rule of law, the ability to discern between fact and fiction, how to resist authoritarian impulses, and to consider future generations as they make decisions. While this view is presently out-of-favor, we hope that pointing to it reminds us all that higher education has not always been primarily about jobs, but also about the health and vitality of our culture and society. In 2018, this is no longer a pipe dream or fanciful nostalgia, but an imperative (Hora, Benbow, & Oleson, 2016).

All of this is to argue for a more expansive view of higher education that takes into account the structural changes and forces that shape our career prospects, our political discourse, and our natural world while aiming to craft a college experience that truly puts students and society in the best position to succeed—not just in economic terms, but also as citizens and human beings. ☐

Resources

■ Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning—A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, *27*(6), 12–26.

■ Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (241–258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

■ Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York, NY: Scribner.

■ Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

■ Gonzáles, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.

■ Heckman, J. J., Stixrud, J., & Urzua, S. (2006). The effects of cognitive and noncognitive abilities on labor market outcomes and social behavior. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *24*(3), 411–482.

■ Hora, M., Benbow, R., & Oleson, A. (2016). *Beyond the skills gap: Preparing college students for life and work.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

■ Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465.

■ Moreau, M. P., & Leathwood, C. (2006). Graduates' employment and the discourse of employability: a critical analysis. *Journal of Education and Work*, *19*(4), 305–324.

■ National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)(2017). *Job outlook 2018*. Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers.

■ Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

■ Quillian, L., Pager, D., Hexel, O., & Midtbøen, A. H. (2017). Meta-analysis of field experiments shows no change in racial discrimination in hiring over time. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(41), 10870–10875.

■ Savitz-Romer, M., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., & Fancsali, C. (2015). Social, emotional, and affective skills for college and career success. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *47*(5), 18–27.

■ Urciuoli, B. (2008). Skills and selves in the new workplace. *American Ethnologist, 35(2),* 211–228.

■ Wolff, R., & Booth, M. (2017). Bridging the gap: Creating a new approach for assuring 21st century employability skills. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *49*(6), 51–54.