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# Skills to Pay the Bills: A Review of College Student Employability Literature

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Abstract

Research has shown that many U.S. college students do not graduate with employable

skills beyond academic competency to facilitate their professional success post-

graduation. Moreover, researchers have found that academic- and industry-specific

knowledge alone is inadequate to help college graduates secure a job and meet the

demands of the contemporary, nuanced, dynamic work environment. In addressing

decreases in state and federal allocations for higher education and the added pressure to

produce work-ready college graduates, institutions have grappled with how to enhance

student workforce development and prepare students for the labor market. As a result,

this literature review provides a comprehensive, global outline of both employability and

career readiness literature to understand how these concepts have been defined and

measured in the past, and how researchers view employability as fitting into a 21st

century postsecondary student success initiative.

*Keywords*: college students, employability, career readiness, post-graduate

outcomes, post-graduate success

**Skills to Pay the Bills:**

**A Review of College Student Employability Literature**

The economic recession of 2008 in the United States (U.S.) saw the

unemployment level reach 8%, disproportionately affecting young people and historically

underrepresented populations (Carnevale, 2016). In the United Kingdom (U.K.), the

economic recessions of the 1990s and mid 2000s created a similar situation in rising

unemployment for young and marginalized people, producing a ripple effect throughout

Europe (Knight & Yorke, 2004). As both the U.S. and U.K. economies have slowly

recovered, competition for jobs between laid off employees returning to work and new

college graduates has intensified the focus on what characteristics employers desire for

their workforce (Carnevale & Smith, 2013). Career readiness (in the U.S.) and

employability (in the U.K.) have subsequently become the buzz words for describing and

compartmentalizing the capabilities required of employees in the emergent post-recession

labor market.

In response, in their roles as sources of highly skilled and trained workers,

institutions of higher education in Europe and the United States have begun to focus even

more on the development of college students' career readiness and employability for both

individual and national economic benefits (Carnevale, 2016, Hillage & Pollard, 1998;

Hart Research Associates, 2013). This attention to postgraduate employment outcomes

has affected the institution of postsecondary education, deeply, forcing a reevaluation of

the core purpose and function of higher education. While old arguments again resurface

within this new economic and social context (Hora 2019; Kerr, 2001; Labaree, 1997;

Stone, 2012), the function of higher education continues to be contested and forced us to

reconsider: Is higher education a public good or an individual commodity?

The employability prerogative has brought this debate back to the fore, and with

it, potentially damaging and/or innovative implications for the institution of higher

education in general (Carnevale, 2016; Harvey, 2001; Hora et al., 2016). Through a

pragmatic, academic investigation of postsecondary graduate employability, higher

education institutions can generate policy and evidence-based practices that facilitate

improved transitions for undergraduate students to the labor market and support lifelong

career success.

## Higher Education and Employability

Research has demonstrated that students enroll in higher education to enhance

their future employment prospects (Egan et al., 2013; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004).

Completing a higher education credential has historically been presented as one of the

more certain long-term investments postsecondary students can make in their economic

future (Carnevale, 2016; Carnevale et al., 2017; Hout, 2012). Not only is higher

education considered by some as a more secure return on investment, but much research

has found that completing a postsecondary degree is a facilitator of economic success and

upward mobility in our society (Carnevale, 2016; Chetty et al., 2017). However,

actualizing these benefits may hinge upon postsecondary graduates obtaining suitable

employment after graduation.

Acquiring professional employment after gradution is a process that catalyzes for some individuals in establishing their fiscal independence, self-reliance, and upward mobility (Arum & Roksa, 2014; Carnevale et al., 2017; Chetty et al., 2017). According to a survey of college students conducted by Egan et al. (2016), 85% of students claimed their primary reason for enrolling and attending college was to have a successful career. Further, research has demonstrated that acquiring a postsecondary credential or bachelor's degree has been related to higher median earnings (Bowels et al., 2001; Carnevale, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Despite universities' and faculty members' focus away from the capitalist pursuit of income (Kalfa & Taksa, 2013), it should come as no surprise to higher education that society links a postsecondary credential to greater labor market outcomes (Carnevale et al., 2017; Chetty et al., 2017).

Inversely, the contemporary shift in higher education towards incorporating student employability into higher education has been met with resistance from some faculty (Osborne, 2017; Stokes, 2015). In an interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Anthony Carnevale shared with Berrett (2014) that higher education in the U.S., "really is a workforce-development system," although higher education "doesn't like to see it that way" (para. 14). Relatedly, Kalfa and Taksa (2013) explained that the employability agenda asserts a neoliberal human capital approach to higher education that effectively reduces education to serving the economic interests of capitalism and reinforces social inequity due to limited access to higher education for historically marginalized groups. Osborne et al. (2017) characterized the infusion of employability in the academy as a neoliberal pursuit that degrades the higher education experience to an

assembly line moving workers from college to industry. However, faculty members have extracted financial capital from institutions in the form of salaries, while resisting the very notion of college student employability, resulting in the paradox of faculty members rejecting the very consumerism of which they are taking part (Osborne et al., 2017). Moreover, researchers have connected this sense of capitalism and consumerism as it relates to student employability and the labor market.

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce reinforced and further defined the consumerist perspective of higher education, as it is estimated that 65% of all jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education by 2020 (Carnevale et al., 2013). In short, this means that access to the middle class through upward mobility or sustaining one's position within the middle class will require employment in a career that requires a postsecondary credential. If higher education institutions have been responsible for providing an education that facilitates upward mobility and economic security of its graduates (Carnevale et al., 2017), then it is important for institutions to consider the employability of their graduates in securing an equitable presence in a changing labor market.

As a result of the growing importance of employability of college graduates, this literature review aims to provide a synthesis of employability research as it relates to higher education over the past two decades. The purpose of this literature review will be to inform how administrators, faculty members, and other campus community members can better ensure that all college graduates, from any institution type, are employable in the labor market they encounter.

**The Evolution of Employability for College Graduates**

After conducting this literature review, three distinct but related perspectives emerged related to college graduates and their success in gaining employment. Most of the early literature investigating college graduate employability utilizes a human capital perspective in describing how graduates acquire certain attributes and skills to attain and maintain employment (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). More recently, the literature around graduate employability has evolved to incorporate social and cultural capital theories related to mechanisms of employability development (Kalfa & Taksa, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). A third contemporary strand in the literature has emerged that posits employability is developed through a process intertwined with an individual's pre-professional identity development while completing a postsecondary credential (Holmes, 2013; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Peeters et al., 2017). As a result, this literature review is divided into these three sections to describe the extant employability literature from a human capital framework, from social and cultural capital perspectives, and from a contemporary mindset synthesizing employability and student identity development.

**The European Context and the Evolution of Employability**

In the European context, higher education's focus on postgraduate employment outcomes occurred in two phases. The first phase resulted from the economic recession and subsequent rise in unemployment in the United Kingdom (U.K.) during the mid to late 1990s (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Then, phase two was initiated by the global economic recession of 2008-2009, and the concept of employability addressed the decline

in youth employment, rising underemployment, and issues related to the discrepancy between skills provided and demanded in the labor market (U.K. Commission of Employment and Skills, 2014). After the economic recovery stabilized in 2012, the U.K. has maintained a sharp focus on the employability of college and trade school graduates through policy development and interventions aimed at higher education (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017).

**Employability**

In response to the economic recession of the 1990s, the U.K. Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned an investigation of the relevant literature, and supplemented discussions with DfEE officials, faculty, and employers to develop a definition and framework for the concept of employability (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Key findings revealed that employability is a multidimensional concept involving individual and contextual characteristics that affect the capability of an individual to, "gain initial employment, maintain employment and to obtain new employment if required" (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 1). According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability centers on five components related to the individual: assets of knowledge, skills and attitudes, utility and deployment of assets, how these assets are presented to prospective employers, and the context (personal circumstances and labor market conditions) within which they pursue work. An important observation reported by the DfEE cited the variance in the "balance of importance" (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 1) between these five elements will differ among groups of individuals and their relationship to the labor market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998).

While there is no singular definition of employability (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), the term has been adopted in the European context for the study and description of the ability to be employed. Generally, employability has been understood as, "the propensity to acquire and maintain employment" (Harvey, 2001, p. 4). Harvey's (2001) European concept of employability includes the consideration of the relationship between the individual and the labor market as well as the individual's circumstances. This broadened understanding of employability beyond individual skills and attributes is important, as it opens the conversation to include a more holistic understanding of employability and aids in identifying inequities in the acquisition of employment by marginalized populations.

It is important to note that the European and Australian explanations of employability are the primary contexts that address individual demographic characteristics like race, ethnicity, age, and gender as impacting one's ability to acquire and maintain employment. This is an important and relevant element of employability that more broadly defines and describes the phenomena of acquiring employment and allows for the inclusion of dialogues centered on inequality and social justice.

**The USEM Account of Employability**

Knight and Yorke (2004) defined employability as, "…a set of achievements, understandings, and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (p. 22). Knight and Yorke (2004) developed what has become a canonical model of employability referred to as the Understanding Skillful Practices, Efficacy Beliefs, and Metacognition (USEM) Account of Employability. Representing understanding, skillful practices, efficacy beliefs, and

metacognition this model challenges the notion that employability is strictly about a collection of skills or competencies. Knight and Yorke (2004) explained that employability incorporates personal attributes and is composed of a students' experiences before college and that employability is developed, "throughout the different phases of higher education" (p. 46).

**Essential Elements of Employability**

Motivated to articulate employability in terms appropriate for non-experts, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) developed the Essential Elements of Employability Model that centers employability on a student's efficacy beliefs. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) explained that a graduate's self-confidence, esteem, and efficacy are developed through a process of reflection and evaluation occurring within the context of career development learning, work and life experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence.

The Essential Elements of Employability effectively illustrates the interrelationship between higher education completion and employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Their model asserts that a college graduate's employability is determined by the level of engagement a student experiences in "five essential components" (p. 280) during their undergraduate education. These five components are designed to overlap and provide the foundation of the model: career development learning, experience (work and life), degree subject knowledge (understanding and skills), generic skills, and emotional intelligence (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). The authors suggested that providing students with opportunities to access development across all these components coupled with

reflection and evaluation of their experiences, "will result in development of higher levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem" (p. 281), calling these the crucial links to employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). It is essential for this model to work that students are provided opportunities to reflect and evaluate their experiences with fellow students, faculty, or staff to center and ground their learning. However, the modern higher education experience offers opportunities for reflection and evaluation of mainly academic and intellectual performance metrics. To facilitate the development of the crucial links to employability, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) explained that students need exposure to "sources of efficacy beliefs" (p. 286) to solidify their employability development.

Other authors have expanded the notion of employability that reaches beyond individual characteristics to include contextual and external factors affecting employability (Aamodt & Havnes, 2008; Alvarez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Bernston et al., 2006). Aamodt and Havnes (2008) proposed that employability is a dynamic phenomenon affected by political and labor market demands that impact what employability is and means. This work extends employability beyond the ability of individuals to acquire a job, explaining that it is an attitude and a state-of-mind open to continued life-long learning that persists throughout a person's career. Therefore, employability encompasses multidimensional characteristics of individual graduates, their context, and their ability to effectively gain and retain employment.

## Skills and the Human Capital Perspective of Employability

The role of higher education in developing college graduates for the labor market in the U.S. has been brought to the fore of the contemporary debate regarding the purpose and function of higher education (Arum & Roksa, 2014; Carnevale & Rose, 2015; Hart & Associates, 2015; Hora et al., 2016; NACE, 2015; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2018). The research on postgraduate employability in North America has predominantly utilized a human capital framework, which posits that individuals can achieve professional development and career advancement by investing in education, competence development and job experience (Berntson et al., 2006). This reliance on the human capital perspective has articulated a myriad of professional skills and competencies believed to be essential in supporting postgraduate career outcomes for college students. From career readiness competencies (NACE, 2015), to marketable skills (THECB, 2018b), to 21$^{st}$ century skills (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012), there exists a plethora of combinations of skills sets that could facilitate college students' transition from the classroom to their career. The skill sets articulated from the human capital perspective tend to be organized around an individual's ability to solve problems, work effectively in teams, communicate and lead across social and cultural boundaries, all while being flexible and adaptable to new and challenging situations (Burnett & Taylor, 2020; Burnett, 2021). What follows is an abridged discussion of the more prevalent collections of employability skill competencies provided by the literature.

### Career Readiness

The U.S. economy and job market were slow to recover from the Great Recession

of 2007 (Carnevale et al., 2013). In recovering from the recession, the U.S. faced and

continues to face the challenges of employing those who lost their jobs during the

recession while simultaneously creating jobs for recent college graduates entering the

market. To meet this new and growing demand, the National Association of Colleges and

Employers (NACE) developed the term *career readiness* and eight associated

competencies to focus the college to career conversation on the skills required for

graduates entering the labor market. NACE defined career readiness as, "the attainment

and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a

successful transition into the workplace" (NACE, 2015, para. 2). The eight NACE

competencies essential in developing students for the workforce are 1) critical

thinking/problem solving; 2) oral/written communications; 3) teamwork/collaboration; 4)

digital technology; 5) leadership; 6) professionalism/work ethic; 7) career management;

and 8) global/intercultural fluency. According to NACE (2015), their, "…competencies

provide for development of strategies and tactics that will close the gap between higher

education and the world of work" (para. 12). NACE (2015) also posited that the

establishment of these competencies provides a common vernacular and guidelines for

training students and offers optics for assessment when hiring college graduates.

  Arguing for an alignment of higher education, workforce development, and public

policy toward college graduates' ability to gain employment, NACE convened a task

force to describe what competencies employers' value most (NACE, 2015). These eight

competencies were developed from over 606 survey respondents comprised of

organizations that hire through university recruiting efforts. Respondents participating in

the survey provided commentary that higher education needs to incorporate real-world experiences and curriculum development that prepares students for work after college.

**Twenty-First Century Skills**

Articulating college graduates' employability in a slightly nuanced way, Pellegrino and Hilton (2012) offered a concise and thorough representation of the skills commonly associated with postgraduate employment success. In their study, Pellegrino and Hilton (2012) compartmentalized the language and associated phenomena to create a taxonomy of skills, describing the ability of college graduates to secure and maintain employment. Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) taxonomy entitled "Twenty-First Century Skills" (p. 20) is divided into three domains: "cognitive, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills" (p. 21). The cognitive domain involves thinking and corresponding abilities like "reasoning and problem solving, and memory" (p. 21). Intrapersonal competence involves, "emotions and feelings and includes self-regulation and the ability to set and achieve goals" (p. 21). And interpersonal competencies are "those used to both express information to others and to interpret other's messages (both verbal and nonverbal) and respond appropriately" (p. 22). Ultimately, Pellegrino and Hilton (2012) suggested that Twenty-First Century Skills are transferable to new and unique situations, encompassing both content and procedural knowledge and when to apply them.

Twenty-First Century Skills are organized into clusters for the purposes of developing an environment and organization for facilitating the acquisition of these skills and competencies. The cognitive competencies cluster includes cognitive processes and strategies, knowledge, and creativity, and all are believed to be predominantly developed

through the curricular experience. The cluster of cognitive processes and strategies include, "critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, interpretation, and decision making" (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 34). Knowledge is explained as, "information literacy, information communications technology literacy, oral and written communication and active listening" (p. 34). Creativity is believed by the authors to involve the incorporation of unique problem-solving strategies and innovation of new perspectives of problems. Clearly the development within the domain of cognitive processes requires achievement in the curricular arena, however the co-curricular environment offers opportunity as well for the development of Twenty-First Century Skills.

Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) intra- and inter-personal domains of Twenty-First Century Skills are presented in both the curricular and co-curricular environments. However, it is the co-curricular setting that offers opportunity for the refinement of these competencies. The cluster of intra-personal competencies are described as, "intellectual openness, work ethic and conscientiousness, and positive core self-evaluation" (p. 35) and center on individual characteristics related to acquiring employment. Intellectual openness involves flexibility, adaptability, cultural appreciation, personal and social responsibility, curiosity, and an appreciation for diversity. Work ethic and conscientiousness centers on an individual's initiative, self-direction, responsibility, perseverance, grit, productivity, professionalism, ethics, integrity, and career orientation. Positive core self-evaluation is exemplified by one's self-monitoring and evaluation, and physical and psychological health. The development of intrapersonal competencies,

according to Pellegrino and Hilton (2012), required that the individual be given both the opportunity to define these competencies for themselves and the time and space to refine them.

Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) interpersonal competencies are best understood as those abilities required of individuals in working together with other individuals and among groups. This cluster of interpersonal competencies includes, "teamwork and collaboration, and leadership" (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 36). Teamwork and collaboration incorporate an individual's ability to deploy skills of communication, collaboration, cooperation, empathy perspective, trust, service orientation, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Leadership is presented as a person's capability for leading, taking responsibility, using assertive communication and self-presentation, and navigating social influence with others. While interpersonal interaction occurs within the curricular environment, in the form of group projects and classroom settings, interpersonal competencies are often not evaluated or assessed by faculty. However, the authors argue that "…in a responsive social setting, learners observe the criteria that others use to judge competence and can adopt those criteria" (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 96). This entails that students use social settings to self-evaluate their behavior and adjust in accordance with their perceptions of how others' behavior is received. In all, Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) Twenty-First Century Skills articulated a useful model for researchers and practitioners to envision how college graduates can be prepared for the workforce.

**Marketable Skills**

Akin to Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) work, literature emphasizing marketable skills has provided some similar, however nuanced descriptions of employability and what specific marketable skills are most valuable to employment and the economy. According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), marketable skills are individual non-technical competencies understood to be applicable across a wide range of employment contexts (Hart & Associates, 2018). Similarly, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2018) defined marketable skills to, "include interpersonal, cognitive, and applied skill areas valued by employers, and are primary or complimentary to a major" (p. 1). These skills are developed throughout the higher education experience and occur within academic, employment and social domains. However, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) Higher Education Strategic Planning Committee, "students were graduating with desired skills, but simply not realizing it" (THECB, 2018b, p. 2). Addressing the inability of college graduates to articulate the employment skills they possess is important, as students who can effectively market their skills to potential employers can secure employment that provides competitive earnings (THECB, 2018b p. 1). As a result, competitive earnings for graduates assist in accelerating student loan repayment and reducing student loan default, providing a mechanism for social mobility.

Another advantage to a marketable skills approach is that occupation specific knowledge or skills may not be transferable between industries. However, marketable skills, while variable to a degree, are for the most part transferable between industries (Carnevale et al., 2013). In fact, currently only 30% of graduates are employed in jobs

that are congruent with their degree, meaning the other 70% depend on marketable skills to acquire and maintain employment (Carnevale et al., 2013). The ability of a graduate to secure employment in a field different from their degree field is almost entirely built on a graduate's ability to articulate and perform these requisite marketable skills. This is an extremely valuable characteristic of marketable skills, as universities can efficiently facilitate the development and application of these skills across academic fields of study and occupations (Burnett & Taylor, 2020; Burnett, 2021).

In essence, marketable skills provide a way for graduates to package and repackage their skill sets and competencies to accommodate their current labor market context. This implies that a college graduate's skills would fluctuate depending on the demands of their potential employer and the labor market. Here, college graduates must understand what skills to develop and present to employers to "make the connection between what they learn and the functional value of that learning" (THECB, 2018a, p. 7). A key element in developing the connections between their college experience and labor market demands involves bridging the co-curricular and curricular higher education experience. By identifying and valuing the marketable skills, abilities, and attitudes developed within the universal student experience, higher education can begin to empower students and their marketability as graduates (Burnett & Taylor, 2020; Burnett, 2021).

The human capital approach to employability has served well in developing a common vernacular and taxonomy of employment skills generally valued by employers (NACE 2015; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). This pragmatic approach to identifying the

tangible skills and competencies required of college graduates' career success provides a

road map for higher education faculty and staff in developing programs and policy to

support students in acquiring these skills (Athas & Oakes, 2013; Seemiller, 2018).

Further, a common language and understanding around the composition of employability

skills provides consistent metrics that can assist in evaluating how students develop skills

in preparation for their transition from college to career (NACE, 2015). However, critics

of the human capital approach argue that this perspective assumes a gap exists between

the skills college graduates possess and the skills employers want (Jackson, 2016;

Tomlinson, 2017). These critics reject the skills gap narrative and assert that

employability is composed of factors that implicate teaching, individual contexts, degree

program, college, and dynamic labor market conditions. Instead, other scholars have

articulated the notion that employability is a form of capital that students can reap from

an institution or their community contexts (Kalfa & Taksa, 2017; Osborne et al., 2017).

## Employability as Capital

A counter narrative to the human capital perspective and prioritizing of skill

development quietly emerged in the early 2000s. Subsequently, contemporary literature

has become steeped with concepts that broaden the understanding of what employability

is, how it is developed, and who has access to it. New perspectives have emerged that

refute the employability skills narrative as reducing academic values to neoliberal

capitalist priorities (Kalfa & Taksa, 2017; Osborne et al., 2017) and problematizing the

human capital perspective as inadequate in encapsulating the entirety of graduate

employability (Brown et al., 2003; Hora; 2019; Jackson, 2016). This strand of literature

has declared that viewing employability through social and cultural frames reveals how

employability is leveraged to maintain inequality in the labor market (Brown et al., 2003;

Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017). What follows is an overview describing the

relevant work analyzing how the concept and application of employability serves to

maintain inequality and how it can be used as an emancipatory force for marginalized

populations.

**Leveraging Inequality through Employability**

The dependence on the employability skills narrative facilitates how cultural

capital is leveraged to replicate inequality via the education system and how

employability is susceptible to replicating inequality as what constitutes employability is

defined by the social class with more power (Brown et al., 2003). Through an application

of a positional conflict theory to employability, Brown et al. (2003) exposed how

dominant groups in society leverage their understanding of and preference for

employability traits in hiring prospective employees.

Employability has been a socially constructed phenomenon that is shaped by the

nature of the changing labor market (Brown et al., 2003). Economic conditions drive

labor market demands which, according to Brown et al. (2003), dictate which jobs and

which skills employers need. Therefore, Brown et al. (2003) established that

employability cannot be exclusively defined in terms of individual characteristics, as

employability is dependent upon two dimensions: the relative and the absolute. Identified

as the "duality of employability" (Brown et al., 2003, p. 110), Brown et al. (2003)

described employability as an interplay between individual characteristics (absolute

dimension) and labor market realities (relative dimension). Here, Brown et al. (2003) explained, "employability not only depends on fulfilling the requirements of a specific job, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers" (p. 111). Applying their positional conflict theory to the concept of employability, Brown et al. (2003) developed two elements involving how the social elite "rig" the market for credentials (p. 117). The following is a synthesis of literature describing how dominant groups in society manipulate the requirements for admission to the labor market and stratify the ordering of individuals attempting to access it.

**Rigging the Market**

Rigging the market for credentials, according to Brown et al. (2003), explains the way status groups monopolize entry requirements into a profession to restrict access, and the way that powerful social groups will structure the competition for employment in favor of those with the appropriate cultural capital. Similarly, Kalfa and Taksa (2015) explained that the labor market serves as a network of relationships within a specific historical and social context, described by Bourdieu (2005) as a field. Within the labor market there exists many fields, or professions, where Kalfa and Taksa (2015) explained, individuals subscribe themselves to the prevailing doxa (Bourdieu, 2000). For Bourdieu (2000), a doxa is a set of fundamental beliefs that are commonly understood as inherently true among individuals, steering the fundamental principles, beliefs, and rules of behavior of those participating in a specific field. According to Kalfa and Taksa, (2015), a doxa internalizes and reproduces the commonly accepted principles and rules of behavior within the specific fields of the labor market. Understanding the labor market in this way

recognizes that social processes dictate what fields or professions value, and therefore,

how professionals within that field view themselves and prospective professionals.

However, there exists an underlying perception or habitus (Bourdieu, 2005) that

maintains the systemic propensity for exclusion or admission into a field, resulting in a

stratified, hierarchical profession or field.

  Over time, participants within a field become conditioned to replicating certain

understandings and behaviors related to membership in that field through a subconscious

process called habitus (Bourdieu, 2005). Building upon Bourdieuian ideals, Kalfa and

Taksa (2013) described habitus as determining the way individuals act, think, and feel,

collectively working to sustain a status quo. The impact of habitus in determining access

to a field or profession is explained by Brown et al. (2003) as, "the tendency for

companies to recruit workers in their own image, reproducing class, gender and ethnic

inequalities…" (p. 116). Further, Brown et al. (2003) asserted that this employment

stratification places a higher premium on personal qualities and skills rather than pure

academic ability. This phenomenon, in essence, "rigs the system" (Brown et al., 2003, p.

117) of employment in a field to favor those who appear congruent with the habitus and

doxa of the field.

  Explained commonly as cultural fit, Brown et al. (2003) claimed, "the value of an

individual to an employer is no longer represented by the denomination of academic

currency, but the economy of experience" (p. 120). Hora (2019) supported Brown et al.'s

(2003) notion, finding that 74% of employers hire for cultural fit, and that matching

applicants to jobs hinges on the fit of applicant personalities with the personalities of

existing departmental staff and existing dominant industry specific norms. Brown et al. (2003) articulated this same idea, saying, "When employers reject candidates as unsuitable it could be argued that they are being rejected for lacking cultural capital" (p. 120). This reality explains why some people, despite having the required credentials, are denied access to positions because elements of their personality or experience are determined as incongruent by the prevailing habitus within that field.

Hora (2019) offered concern for the concept of preference for hiring applicants who match the personalities and predilections of current employees, as this process may facilitate discrimination if incumbent employees represent a dominant group. Therefore, Hora (2019) posited that cultural matching may exacerbate or embody discriminatory practices. As a result, Hora (2019) explained that further research across industries and occupational groups is needed, and that postsecondary professionals should explicitly address these issues while considering student employability.

Compounding this phenomenon is the requirement of acquiring credentials for a field through higher education. Since low-income people and people of color have historically had less access to higher education (Ladson-Billings, 2006), these people have enjoyed fewer opportunities to qualify for admission to professional fields. In this sense, education credentials and subsequently employability become mechanisms that facilitate the replication of inequality. Exacerbating the educational access dilemma for people from low socioeconomic and marginalized backgrounds is something Brown et al. (2003) called "reputational capital" (p. 121). Reputational capital promotes competition for quality and creates stratification of higher education institutions, academic programs,

and subsequently college graduates themselves (Brown et al., 2003). It is the pursuit for

and maintenance of reputation that provokes the incorporation of meritocratic systems

that organize institutions, programs and people based on their ability to maintain quality

and prestige. Ultimately, a college graduate's perceived cultural fit and their access to

reputational capital (Brown et al., 2003) may affect their employability, whether they are

the most qualified applicant for the job.

**Graduate Employment Capital**

As higher education continues to be held more accountable for developing

graduates' employability in diverse labor markets (Carnevale et al., 2013), a need persists

for capturing the complex nature of defining and developing graduate employability.

Tomlinson (2017) proposed a concept incorporating multiple forms of graduate capital

that are interwoven to form an individual graduates' propensity for employment.

Graduate employability capital, according to Tomlinson (2017), is composed of a

graduates', "…formations of skills, knowledge, social relations, cultural praxis, identities,

and psycho-social dispositions" (p. 348). When combined, these forms of graduate capital

serve as vital resources in empowering graduates' transition into the labor market.

Human capital is treated by Tomlinson (2017) as a base form of capital utilized by

higher education and the labor market to articulate the career related skills required for

graduates to effectively transition to the labor market. Tomlinson (2017) was quick to

declare that human capital alone is inadequate in harnessing the complexities of graduate

employability and must be complemented by other forms of capital to accommodate the

broader employment context in which it is applied. Accomplishing this requires

navigating cultural dynamics in negotiating access to employment, "entailing the deployment of employment-specific cultural capital and their acceptance by employers" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 349). Tomlinson (2017) indicated that personal forms of identity and psychosocial capital influence and interact with human and cultural capital in determining an individuals' cumulative employment capital.

According to Tomlinson (2017), this graduate capital approach assists in resolving the tensions between the disadvantages of students from low SES backgrounds and the provisions of higher education. In this way, higher education offers an opportunity for the development of graduate capital that can serve as an emancipatory force in their intellectual development and access to equitable employment. A core feature and strength of the capital approach is its ability to accommodate the influence of multiple resources, "which are constitutive of employability" (p. 349) are acquired across various domains and not confined to formal educational experiences. Therefore, the development of graduate employment capital is, "processual and relational in the sense that capitals are acquired and deployed over time and their effects sustained across a range of employment-related contexts" (p. 349). Clearly, one's life experience prior to and during undergraduate education will influence and develop that graduates' capacity for employment while also influencing their appeal to potential employers. However, a crucial link in this process is graduates' ability in bridging their experience, knowledge, and skills to the desired employment outcome.

**Employability Capital**

Peeters et al. (2019) set out to consolidate the existing employability literature into a new concise conceptual framework. To provide conceptual clarity, Peeters et al. (2019) presented a new conceptual framework called, "employability capital" that is based on a review of the extant literature (p. 80). The authors found two types of distinctions within the literature: an (1) employability distinction, which differentiates between job-related, career-related, and development-related employability capital, and (2) a capital distinction which differentiates between human capital (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and social capital (Peeters et al., 2019).

As existing literature had focused solely on job acquisition, Peeters et al.'s (2019) notion of employment capital addresses the skills and attributes required to acquire and retain employment. Within their theory, Peeters et al. (2019) articulated three challenges and associated competencies that literature has found to be cumbersome for college graduates entering the job market. First, Peeters et al. (2019) reasoned that these competencies were *job-related* (specific and generic) related to their present job, *career-related* as they impact jobs in the future, and *development-related* to shape a long-term career. Connecting this theory to prior forms of capital, Peeters et al. (2019) reasoned that two specific forms of capital, both human and social, are woven into employment capital, producing what individuals know, what skills they possess, who individuals know, and the expanse of their professional networks and relationships.

Peeters et al. (2019) also reasoned that employment capital encompasses four core dimensions: job-related attitudes, job-related expertise, career-related employability

capital, and development-related employability capital. Although each of these four dimensions are critical for college students to develop throughout their postsecondary career, Peeters et al. (2019) explained that the students' human and social capital also influences how well these students can develop within these four dimensions to increase their employability before they graduate.

### Employability as a Component of Identity Development

Kaufman and Feldman (2004) approached the role of college in the formation of self-perceived identities by viewing college as an "arena of social interaction in which the individual comes into contact with a multitude of actors in a variety of settings, emphasizing these social interactions and other social influences the identities of individuals are, in part, constituted" (p. 464). Arguing for a sociological approach to college impacts, the authors contended this approach, "concentrates on the distinctive life-cycle and institutional context in which college students are located by emphasizing the societal functions of higher education" (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004, p. 464).

Kaufman and Feldman (2004) focused their study on the ways in which college certifies students for certain social and occupation positions in the world, channeling them in these directions, and to some extent, ensuring them of entrance to such positions. This world view of college presents higher education as a mechanism for placing students and graduates into a socially situated hierarchy. In addition to skill development. Kaufman and Feldman (2004) also noted that students have, "new and validated social statuses" (p. 465) attached to them to which new personal qualities are appropriate.

Kaufman and Feldman (2004) explained that these adopted personal qualities are a students' felt identity, and the authors investigated particularly how the felt identities of students are affected by participating in college. Kaufman and Feldman's (2004) work helped build the case for the impact of the college experience on student identity development, particularly as it relates to occupation. The authors describe how attending college is a process of stratifying social class and transforming adolescents into young adults (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). Citing Feldman (1972), the authors noted, "that as students' progress through college they are supplied with more than the specific skills, motives and attitudes they may need in their future positions" (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004, p. 465).

The second domain articulated by Kaufman and Feldman (2004) found that changes to an individual's felt identity revolves around occupation and career. Similar to development of knowledgeability, the relationship between felt occupational identity and a college education, "is one that is permeated by societal assumptions" (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004, p. 473). The acquisition of an occupation or career identity derives from the interactive context of college in which the individual is situated.

Through social interactions, students create a social reality of the occupations to which they aspire, as well as construct a corresponding felt identity that becomes embedded. These social interactions, while not a part of the curriculum, play a significant role in establishing who students see themselves to be beyond graduation. Students' construction of felt occupational identities is developed through both direct and indirect interactions with peer students. These interactions contribute further to the social

comparisons and reflected appraisals that help form an individual's felt identity

(Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). As a result, Kaufman and Feldman (2004) argued that a

student's peer network—while in college—can affect a student's perceived employability

through their envisioned identity.

**Employability and Student Identities as Processual**

Building upon prior studies positioning employability and a student's identity as

part of a process, Holmes (2013) critiqued the notion that a college graduation is "the

point at which the student should have acquired and should now possess the requisites for

gaining suitable employment" (p. 548). Here, Holmes (2013) argued that this perspective

fails to account for the reality that higher education is merely one stage within the

biographical trajectories of students and graduates: employability is a process. As a

result, Holmes (2013) continued by saying one's employability trajectory is influenced by

one's social background and is constrained by various factors outside the control or

influence of the individual, such as the health of an economy or the strength of a labor

market. According to Holmes (2013), successful individuals are ones who "must become

a graduate, not just in the formal sense of being awarded a degree but in socially and

biographically significant terms, whereby they act in ways that lead others to ascribe to

them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed" (p. 549).

In this vein, Holmes (2013) expanded upon Harre's (1983) notion of an *identity*

*project* that describes the process by which someone moves through higher education into

their post-graduate employment and career. Extending Harre's (1983) work regarding

processed-focused student identity development, Holmes (2013) coined the term

*emergent identity* to describe the space when students are transitioning from college and pursuing employment. In this way, a student's emergent identity can be viewed as an interaction between an individual's perception of themselves and how their significant others perceive the individual (Holmes, 2013). By analyzing different aspects of a student's *emergent identity*, Holmes (2013) posited that one can map an individual's trajectories through completing higher education to acquiring employment. Therefore, Holmes (2013) stated, "graduate employability can be considered as the always-temporary relationship that arises between an individual graduate and the field of employment opportunities" (p. 550), positioning a student's identity and their interactions with others as a crucial aspect of their employability.

**Jackson's (2017) Pre-Professional Identity as Pre-Employability**

Akin to related work that was critical of skills-focused theories, Jackson (2017) argued for redefining and broadening the employability discourse to include the concept of student pre-professional identity (PPI) or PPI development. According to Jackson (2017), "PPI relates to an understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture, and ideology of a student's intended profession" (p. 926).

In terms of developing one's PPI, Jackson (2016) reasoned that students develop their PPI "through their membership, engagement, non-engagement, and boundary and peripheral interactions with different communities" (p. 926). Jackson (2017) continued by asserting that, "during this process, they [students] will acquire disciplinary knowledge, develop non-technical skills, practice applying their learning across different settings, and reflect, visualize and imagine themselves as a graduate and novice professional to

develop their understanding of self" (p. 926). For Jackson (2017), this experiential

development of a student's PPI requires a student to seek opportunities to immerse

themselves within different groups and settings, developing these students' sense of

professional expectations, values, culture, ethical conduct, career management, and

purpose as they relate to their chosen profession. Ultimately, Jackson (2017) contended

that student development of a PPI during their postsecondary years should produce well-

rounded graduates prepared for entry-level positions with enhanced self-awareness,

bolstering their employability in the eyes of a diverse, changing labor market.

**Equity and Social Justice in Employability Models**

Many have argued student debt and graduates' economic woes have been tied to

state-level factors. As state appropriations for higher education continue to diminish, the

burden for covering costs have been pushed onto students and their families (Stater,

2009). Enticing families with the promise of higher incomes and upward mobility,

gaining a college degree is recognized as the most reliable way for facilitating these

improvements to one's social status and economic promise (Carnevale et al., 2017;

Chetty et al., 2017; THECB, 2018a). Unfortunately, rising costs only tell us a portion of

the problem. Employment of recent graduates into jobs that don't afford them the

financial capability to repay loans serves as a major contributor to rising debt and default

on student loans. Simply put, a college degree alone is not necessarily enough. For

students most at risk for gainful entry to the labor market weighing the promise of

upward mobility and college debt can be discouraging.

Higher education institutions are offering greater access for low-income and

under-resourced students, but improving access brings growing, "economic, demographic, and funding stratification" (Carnevale et al., 2017, p. 12). However, privatization of higher education resulting from diminishing state appropriations, supports the argument of growing inequality in higher education enrollment and completion between high and low socioeconomic classes (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Stater, 2009). Bailey and Dynarski (2011) found "the gap in the college entry rate between the bottom and top income quartiles increased from thirty-nine to fifty-one percentage points" (p. 5). This gap is reflected in the completion rates as well, as the authors note that education attainment is correlated with causes of future earning potential. Further analysis found a strong relationship between income and college persistence, and implies, "that equal increases in college entry will generate highly unequal increases in college completion" (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011, p. 5). The disparity in college persistence and completion rates, and subsequent income disparity, between students from high versus low socioeconomic backgrounds is further compounded by the type of institutions students enroll.

Wealthy, White students are more concentrated in the nation's top 500 most highly funded, selective four-year institutions, while African American, Latinx, immigrant, and low-income students are becoming more concentrated in the 3,000 underfunded and crowded open admissions four and two-year colleges (Carnevale et al., 2016; Chetty et al., 2017). As Chetty et al. (2017) explained further, "the degree of income segregation across colleges is comparable to the degree of income segregation across neighborhoods in the average American city" (p. 2). The result of stratified higher

education enrollment, persistence, and completion rates compounded by stratification of institution type effectively determine the odds of success and economic potential for graduates. Carnevale et al. (2016) made the claim directly stating:

> We have arrived at a point where our racial, ethnic, and class inequality is primarily driven not by the vulgar motivations of Jim Crow racism or class bias, but race and class neutral economic and educational mechanisms that ultimately have the same effect as race or class animus. (p. 12)

If higher education is to make good on its claim of offering opportunity to low-income families to acquire an education that leads to gainful employment, serious efforts need to be made in ensuring that graduates possess the necessary competencies for employability. Research has shown that some students have not graduated with skills and competencies beyond academic content to facilitate their professional success post-graduation (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Burnett & Taylor, 2020; Burnett, 2021; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Hora, et al., 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012; Stokes, 2015; The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012).

## Conclusion

In all, this literature review identified and articulated three strands of related employability literature—those focused on human capital (Hart & Associates, 2013; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; NACE, 2015; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012; THECB, 2018a), social and cultural capital theories (Hora, 2019; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015, 2017; Peeters et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017), and identity development (Holmes, 2013; Jackson, 2017;

Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). However, this research must inform future research and

practice and how institutional leaders can better situate resources to support students'

employability in all of its forms.

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