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The College of Humanities and Social Science
The College That Works

A recent Forbes article reports on the so-called employment crisis: “employers and business leaders are beginning to insist that their demand for talent is not being met by the current supply.” The reason for this crisis? Nearly “60 percent of employers say applicants lack crucial ‘communication and interpersonal skills’ . . . and “can’t think critically and creatively, solve problems, or write well.” The complaint comes from industries across the board, including but not limited to STEM fields. While hard skills are certainly necessary in engineering, math, and accounting, all businesses complain that candidates lack soft skills: “leadership, personal and intellectual humility, the ability to attribute some purpose to your work, and the ability to take ownership of the task at hand.” In some fields, on-the-job training may actually trump a candidate’s degree or major. For example, Lazlo Bock, the Vice President for People Operations at Google has remarked that “while you can train employees for many technical abilities, a candidate without these personal characteristics is a non-starter” (Banerjee).

We know that our majors have soft skills in spades: many have proficiency in a foreign language or two, have participated in study abroad, they can read, write, and think critically, they have practiced presentation skills again and again in their classes, they have tutored, and taught, and mentored other students, they have become familiar with research tools and can keep up with ever-changing technology. Our majors are more flexible in the marketplace, and they earn more over time than professional or vocational majors. Yet the perception persists that humanities and social sciences degrees are useless, leading only to dead-end, low paying jobs. This is untrue, but the problem seems

to be that despite their soft-skills and other advantages, our students often fail because they do not know how to market their skills in a business environment.

The humanities and social sciences are in decline, on “life support” as we are told. The dominance of STEM programs, budget cuts to LAS colleges, and the decrease in public funding, the rise of interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism, the abandonment of “Great Books” in favor of what some consider narrower, even more impractical fields such as women’s, gender and ethnic studies, the rise of incomprehensible theory especially in English Studies, have all, it seems, discouraged students, and even angered their parents (Deneen). Consequently, we see a rise in professional and vocational degrees. And the problem is not only outside the academy. Geoffrey Harpham, in his book The Humanities and the Dream of America has said, scholars in the humanities are themselves “conflicted and confused about their mission, [and] suffer from an inability to convey to those on the outside and even to some on the inside the specific value they offer to public culture” (Schrecker).

Defenders of our disciplines generally resort to the traditional arguments in favor of liberal arts education: “the innate beauty and wisdom of the ‘Western canon,’” the humanizing and civilizing effects of contact with the culturally literate world (Ryerson), the development of the complete thinking human being, the link between the liberal arts and an informed democracy. Other defenders have used recent data to argue that there is no crisis in the humanities and social sciences because much of the doomsday data fails to “include all the new area studies that have crept into the humanities in the last half-century” (Silbey). Humanities and social sciences are holding their own in terms of enrollment and awarding of degrees. In fact, according to David Silbey writing in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2013, “while the 60s boom still stands out, we give out far more population-normalized degrees in the humanities than we did in the 1950s or the 1980s.”

Of course we realize that not all of our graduates will go on to teach, or attend graduate school to become college professors, though many do. I conducted an informal survey last year of some of my former students who had graduated in the last 2-3 years and discovered they had found employment in a wide variety of fields:

Project Director, Protean Biopharmaceutical Consulting
Questionnaire Designer, Research and Design, Marketforce
Editor, Marketing Research
Managing Editor, Journal of College Orientation and Transition
Food preparations, Chik-fil-a Corporate
Graduate school—4 respondents
Special Ed Resource Teacher
Teacher ESL Seoul S. Korea
Teacher, 8th grade language arts
Teacher, DeKalb County School District
Teacher, Georgia Connections Academy
Teacher and Soccer Coach
Vet tech
Project Coordinator, Client Services
Librarian, Cobb County Public Library System

One graduate has moved to London, where, in the past three years, she has held jobs as administrative assistant for the Ipswich Borough Council and as an Intelligence Officer for HM Revenues and Customs. She is now employed as a paralegal in a London law firm and planning a graduate career at East Anglia in medieval studies.

None of the graduates who responded to my little survey is stuck in a McJob.

For this project, I wanted to learn what our departments were already doing and so I invited advisers in our departments to learn how they help students enter the working world who are not

interested in teaching or ready to tackle graduate school. I met with Jennifer Dickey, Tom Gray, Susanne Kelley, Matt Mitchelson, David Parker, Melony Parkhurst, Pete Fenton and Susan Kirkpatrick Smith, along with Karen Marks and Jessie Edens McCrary from Career Services to discuss practices in advising students approaching graduation. I learned that there was no college-wide strategy for helping our students seek employment post-graduation, though many departments have active and strong connections with the business and professional world, NGOs and non-profits. I also learned that there is such a thing as KSU 4401, Senior Seminar, a hybrid course that focuses on helping “college students transitioning to post-university life and provide[ing] them with an opportunity to reflect on and provide closure to the collegiate educational experience . . .” (Dominick). The course syllabus I reviewed was taught by Dr. Joan E. Leichter Dominick, and it emphasized designing a career plan that teaches students to utilize and adapt their educational experiences and skills into a “story,” and that leaves them with tangible products they will be able to use not only in their job searches but in their lives as responsible citizens (e.g. portfolio, resume, cover letter, interview experience, etc.). Some departments offer a similar course as a capstone.

Several departments require 3 hour internships as part of the degree, some work closely with Career Services, others do not, some advisers find internship resources through their own contacts, others have students find their own internships or work with Career Services to find them. Some of the advisers (myself included) were unaware that KSU 4401 even existed. There is no consistency in the preparation of our graduates. Of course, our departments need to remain independent in developing ways to help our graduates gain employment, but I see a need for more and perhaps regular meetings like this one so that advisers can share successes and best practices. My colleagues agreed that further meetings would be helpful.

After many conversations and emails with Karen Marks and the CHSS Career Services Coordinator Jessie Edens McCrary, I knew I needed to bring a group of employers, graduates, and Career

Services staff together to discuss KSU's relationship with the business community and the strengths and weaknesses of our students. This Jobs Roundtable took place in September last year and included several representatives and recruiters from the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice, the Arthritis Foundation, and Enterprise Rent-a-Car, five recent KSU graduates representing several of our majors and representatives from Career Services.

Associate Dean Chien-pin Li began the session with some statistics that support my research: four years after graduation, the percentage of employed graduates in the humanities and social sciences compares favorably with graduates in STEM, health sciences and business, being within 4 or 5 percent of their rates of employment. The "common wisdom" that our majors will be stuck in dead-end jobs is simply untrue. True, it often takes our graduates a bit longer to land that permanent job, and they may change jobs several times before they find the permanent position, but four years after graduation, 78.2% of our graduates are employed.

I began the Roundtable by asking the recruiters and employers present how we can do a better job preparing our majors for the business world. The universal answer was: internships. They also listed a number of other areas that need improvement: they need to be able to tell their story and to explain their skills and experiences; to offer examples of how they have used critical thinking. Employers also expected candidates to be able to discuss why they chose their majors, what they intended to do with their degrees. They stressed the need for candidates to do homework on the company with whom they were interviewing, and to be prepared to discuss a two-year plan explaining how they would be valuable down the road to the potential employer. They also joked that it was important for graduates to understand what an entry-level position was! Additionally, they stressed the importance of tailoring every cover letter and resume to the particular company for whom they were applying and using the cover letter as a tool that introduces the candidate, expresses interest in the company or institution, and

provides information about their skills relevant to the position. In sum, our students need to be much better prepared when they enter the job market.

The next question went to students: how do they better prepare themselves for the working world? Students readily admitted that they struggle. They identified one problem as making the transition from internships, class projects, or study abroad experiences from the academic world to the business world. Class is grade-driven, but students do not know how to transfer skills and experiences that will apply on the job, how to move from the academic to the practical. They admitted they lack the skills to adapt. One student wisely remarked that graduates in business and STEM are always grounded in the business and professional world, they are always looking forward to a job, because they are essentially learning a trade. Our majors are learning broad perspectives, and so they have to shape themselves. This is a particular problem because they don't know what they want to do or can do with their majors. Many never even consider the issue until they are about to graduate. They lack a business-world vocabulary. One student recognized that our majors do what businesses need: "we do language"; but he couldn't explain how he would literally "translate" that skill in an interview.

Another question that went to students had to do with the resources at Career Services. Most of them were unaware of the services offered and none had heard of Owl Link. One student suggested that Career Services present more than in just freshman classes and continue presentations up to Senior Seminar. They asked that Career Services be more visible in the classrooms and in the departments. Another urged faculty to be more aware of the resources at Career Services because a student's first line of inquiry is always his or her professor. One student mentioned the plight of transfer students who do not even benefit from the freshman classroom presentations. Several of the students who had taken internships stressed their importance and urged students to take them much earlier in their academic careers.

Students felt strongly about learning how to match skills to the job posting and participating in mock interviews that would help them develop strategies for handling a hypothetical question and the longer interview or interview process. They would also encourage students to take unpaid internships because that demonstrates a commitment and allows for experience with different kinds of businesses. Students also emphasized the importance of part-time work and the skills learned there that should be offered as part of their over-all “story.”

The last portion of the Roundtable centered on what is working at CHSS and what should be improved. Unsurprisingly, internships and part-time jobs topped the list of both what works and what needs improving. The group also concluded that students need considerable assistance learning how to translate the knowledge, skills, and experiences they gain while in school into “business-speak”—they felt particularly inadequate in this area. We also concluded that students need to learn how to tell their story on paper and in an interview. The college, departments, advisers, and faculty need to learn much more about the considerable assets available at Career Services and to work more closely with Jessie McCrary in particular to assess and satisfy each departments’ particular needs.

Employers candidly admitted one of their failings was that job descriptions and ads can be rather opaque for entry-level job seekers. One guest suggested a workshop or class that looks at ads—how to analyze them, understand the terminology, how to adapt experiences to the ad and match skill sets to the needs of the position. Students remarked on this vocabulary gap and put it in these terms: they don’t know what businesses call what they want to and are eager to do.

This was a very productive meeting and all the participants agreed we need to hold additional meetings of employers, faculty advisers, and students and the topics should be expanded.

I entitled this project “The College That Works.” To be honest, I “borrowed” that phrase from DePaul University in Chicago whose motto used to be “The University That Works.” The ethos at DePaul

embraces the aspirations of its working-class, first generation, urban student body. DePaul not only “works” in the sense of functioning well, but its programs “work” for students with diverse career goals. DePaul and its graduates go to “work.” DePaul’s College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, like ours, offers the M.A., but not the Ph.D. (with one exception). The college certainly well prepares students with the desire to go on for the Ph.D. as I did. But the college also works hard to integrate its graduates into the real working world. Let me quote from their mission statement:

LAS values and nurtures the urban and Vincentian mission of DePaul. The interactions among its faculty and between its faculty and its students are characterized by personalism. Significant portions of the curriculum speak to questions of social responsibility, ethical standards for behavior, and an active engagement with the people and the challenges of the Chicago community.

Our college could look to DePaul as one model. Given the public’s perceived disadvantages if suspicions concerning the practicality of some of our fields of study, I think it would be wise to do much more to educate our local, regional, and even national community about the ways our curriculum speaks to and engages the real world.

Obviously, some of my project is already outdated since the college and the university have begun to focus on “engagement” and all that that entails. But I think we need to do more. Maybe our college needs to be the college that works harder. Not only would it be good for our students, but it would be strategic for this college to be able to point to employment data to assert our relevance and importance to the community. Perish the thought that our disciplines go the way of Classics departments!

Going forward I would suggest the following, and forgive me if some of these recommendations are already ongoing or in process—it’s been a busy year and hard to keep up with all the changes!

1. Department advisers should try to meet at least once a semester to discuss successes and best practices.
2. Internships should be required for every major.
3. KSU 4401 or a similar course might be offered once a year or every other year in every department, adapted as a Senior Seminar or capstone topic taught by the department's faculty.
4. We should hold additional Roundtables and invite employers and recruiters specifically to our college to help break the false perceptions about the practicality of our degrees.
5. We need to do a better job educating our faculty on the assets at Career Services; have Career Services visit in class all the way through to Senior Seminar; engage regularly with Jessie McCrary about our particular needs.
6. We must better prepare our students for real world employment, how to market themselves, their experiences and their skills.
7. We must pay attention to the needs of transfer students.
8. We must raise the visibility of Career Services resources in the classroom and in the college.

DePaul characterizes interactions between faculty, students, and the wider social and political needs of metropolitan Chicago as "personalism." I believe our college can characterize our engaged interactions as "practicality." We need to work harder to demonstrate the value of our degrees in, perhaps, less esoteric terms as "the innate beauty and wisdom of the Western canon" and more in the words of our student who said "we do language." We do language, and creative and critical thinking and writing, analysis, and research; we do leadership, initiative, and independent thought; we teach, we communicate, we respond. We need to "sell" those so-called soft-skills to businesses and to the rest of our community. The Business School may not need to work very hard to "sell" its students; but, we do. We must be the college that works.

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