

# A Framework for Embracing Interdisciplinarity in the Context of Job-Readiness Imperatives in College Curricula

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When I was earning a BA in English literature in the late 1990s/early 2000s, I was among the first in my family who were fortunate enough to attend a four-year degree program. The sentiment in my social circles, therefore, was that I was extremely lucky to be able to go to college at all, and I should simply major in a subject in which I had some strengths. I began teaching in an inner-city Philadelphia elementary school in 2002 and taught my first college course in the fall of 2004 as a graduate teaching assistant. Since my teaching assignments were mainly in first-year writing, I had the pleasure of working with students from across campus and across the disciplines. In those early days of teaching, some students talked about majoring in things that were tied to specific careers, such as engineering or computer science. And while the cliché of the overqualified and underemployed barista was already a part of the popular imagination, and the Avenue Q “What do you do with a BA in English/It Sucks to be me” (Lopez & Marx 2003) song had come out the year before, there was still a sense that many people would major in things that they were passionate about—things they were good at—with the idea that having a degree at all would be the leg up they'd need to get a good job, or, at least, to set them on a path toward a fulfilling future career.

However, during and in the wake of the 2008 economic downturn, it was clear that more and more students were feeling the pressure to major in things that would unambiguously lead to lucrative, specific jobs in high demand areas right out of college. Now in 2024, the idea that you would go to college for something simply because you have a passion for it is widely considered a bohemian or fringe decision at best and an irresponsible one at worst. The intervening years have shown that the pressure to have direct-to-industry pipelines in academic programs is only set to increase. And even those programs who are paying attention to such

pressures are not immune to students' and their families' worries about employability; such pressures can unevenly be felt by our most vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Let me share a short anecdote to illustrate this point.

In 2014, I was in the second year of my first tenure-track position in an independent program in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication. Our program had strong and impressive job placement records, and our alumni had fulfilling and lucrative careers in which they quickly rose the ranks to senior roles, such as in project management. We also had a curriculum that was clearly meant to signal to internship providers and potential employers that our students would come right out of the gate with desirable job-readiness skills related to our field—such as web design, professional editing, and digital storytelling. Still, as a program with a highly academic-sounding word like “rhetoric” in the title, and as a program that was easily misunderstood as creative writing, we were not immune to the idea that our curriculum was a frivolous, self-indulgent waste of time.

As one of the primary instructors for the 200-level gateway-to-the-major course, I had the pleasure of interacting with a wide variety of majors and minors as they began their journeys in the program. In one section, I met a brilliant and dynamic young man whose parents had immigrated from Vietnam. He would be the first in his family to be fortunate enough to attend college, and his family pinned all their hopes on his future success. He was sweet, intellectually curious, and extremely creative. His writing and multimodal communication skills started out already strong; over the course of the term, they flourished. As I marveled over the strength of his projects in this early course, I was excited to see what he'd be producing by the end of his time with us. I also appreciated his calm, measured, thoughtful, and novel approach to discussing recalcitrant global problems. He seemed to be able to analyze and critique a wide range of issues with ease. It was clear that he not only was extremely well suited to our program, but also would thrive in it and find the experience enriching and pleasurable.

At the end of the semester, therefore, I was surprised when he came to my office to tell me that he needed to drop the major to take a nursing major. It was clear that he was very upset about this development. Confused, I asked him to sit down and made him a cup of tea. I asked him what had made him change his mind about our program for his major. He said that his parents told him that he was “not allowed to major in writing,” and that he needed to position himself to be able to take care of them when they were older. In their minds, majoring in writing would not be the necessary path forward; they threatened to stop supporting him financially if he did not comply. What was clear from talking with him, though, was that the obligation to his family and a fear that they were right about the uselessness of a writing degree weighed on him even more heavily than the threat of being cut off did.

I pulled together a bunch of data from our alumni showing that they had good careers in which they were making enviable salaries and had achieved or showed great potential for growth. I asked him to share these things with his parents, but he said it wouldn't make a difference. For the next three years, this student would come into our building, which is not at all near where he was taking his classes. In fact, you'd need to literally cross over a highway to come to the writing building from the nursing one. He would sit in the hallways working on his nursing homework in misery. He would lament how difficult the work was for him, describe how he was afraid of the sight of blood and didn't like touching people, and express how much

he would rather be studying writing, rhetoric, and technical communication. I'd give him snacks and tea and say I was sorry. I suggested a writing minor, but, alas, his coursework was so difficult for him and, thus, so demanding of his time that he could not fit it in. While we have lost touch, I can only imagine that he is a nurse these days, and my hope is that maybe he's grown to like it or even love it. His story illustrates how even programs that are deeply engaged in the work of making the value of their curricula intelligible to diverse stakeholders struggle against the pressure on students to major in obviously career-focused subject areas.

What this anecdote also illustrates is something that those of us who work in higher education know well—such pressures are especially strong for our marginalized and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and programs designed to recruit them to such majors are also ubiquitous. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein expresses this concern in a 2019 essay she wrote for *Inside Higher Ed* in which she cautions against not only the “kinds of social pressures” that are leading students to choose STEM majors and, thus, “to choose lives that may make them deeply unhappy,” but also the ways that STEM fields are hostile to marginalized individuals (Prescod-Weinstein).

Concerns for these pressures on students pale in comparison, though, to the pressures on the humanities as we watch other programs get eviscerated or even eliminated in the name of efficiency and economic solvency—a phenomenon that has been widely documented and lamented in everything from elite journalism to blog entries to college newspapers (Hartocollis; Povich; Newfield; Keller). Scholars from across the disciplines are aware of the need to consider diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century and stakeholder exigencies in designing and rethinking college-level curricula (Kumar and Rewari). That said, there is great variation in how job readiness is interpreted (Winterton and Turner; Billett), and recent research suggests that only 25% of recent graduates would pursue the same degree programs if they were to do it over again (Massari). Many employers, moreover, lament that college graduates are deficient in soft skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, speaking, and writing (Wilke; Kapareliotis et al.). Some researchers suggest that capstone courses and major projects are the way forward in the context of the challenges we face, and I don't disagree; meaningful capstone experiences, fully developed projects, practicums, internships, and other extra- and co-curricular experiences are immensely valuable (Muhammad et al.). Yet even at the level of individual courses, how can we build in the capacity to teach students to imagine specific career paths while also leaving room for the kinds of experiences that lead to soft skills that speak specifically to what employers are asking for in job ads?

Such is the current predicament those of us in higher education curriculum development face: how can we create curricula that allow for passionate exploration, play, and self-discovery—keys to the development of enlightened, judicious, and thoughtful citizens—and soft skills while also helping students to unambiguously see the future careers and selves they might inhabit? How can we teach courses that students, internship providers, and potential employers will interpret as valuable while also honoring students' rights to exploring areas of interest for their own sake? Such questions encapsulate the fraught state of higher education and key anxieties about poverty, real and imagined. What is at the heart of these STEM, business, and computer science major imperatives, then, is the fear of going to all the trouble

and expense of college or sacrificing greatly such that your child can do so only to remain just as poor or even worse off.

Once reserved for the wealthy elite, the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill of Rights, opened up higher education for more and more Americans than ever before. The Higher Education Act of 1965 further increased access to colleges and universities for groups who'd previously been excluded. Yet the 1970s ushered in waning public investment in higher education, the rise of reliance on student loans, and more and more financial burdens placed on students and their families in the form of constantly rising tuition and fees.

At the same time, from the 1980s onward, the need for a college degree to obtain employment became increasingly urgent. Each decade since, college has become more and more expensive, reliance on loans has increased, and the idea that going to college is a "must" has become deeply entrenched in our cultural script. And while at one time having a college degree, being what my mother-in-law refers to as a "college graduate"—something she herself never had the opportunity to be—was the goal regardless of major, now there is pressure to have a degree in a precisely defined field of study with a clear path to a lucrative position right out of school. The logic goes that if you cannot draw a neat line between what you are studying and the job you will do, you are wasting your time, you are risking your family's future, and you are being irresponsible. Of course, should you be fortunate enough to "come from money," the boundaries around what you can study are very different. The consequence of these logics is to render humanities, arts, and even to some extent social sciences either out-of-touch, elite endeavors or irrelevant wastes of time.

As a consequence, those researching, writing, and teaching in humanities departments and disciplines are living in highly fraught times. In September of 2023, West Virginia University joined the increasing ranks of institutions who've gutted the liberal arts, a move that many have interpreted as inherently classist as the wide swath of students served by this flagship institution will no longer have access to a range of liberal arts courses and programs—epistemological vantage points associated with the educated elite, with self-exploration, and with the capacity for deep and meaningful thinking.

Such trends speak poignantly to the existential threats the academy faces in the context of late capitalism and attendant climate instability, corporate influences on political and social life, and increasing injustices. Among other concerns with these changes is the fear that the very nature of US higher education is shifting; colleges and universities are less and less places where profound, creative thought and epistemic change are possible and more and more places where rote job skills are learned and where vocational training is offered. In an April 2023 *New York Times* piece, ancient historian and teaching assistant professor at North Carolina State University Bret C. Devereaux relatedly opined:

The steady disinvestment in the liberal arts risks turning America's universities into vocational schools narrowly focused on professional training. Increasingly, they have robust programs in subjects like business, nursing and computer science but less and less funding for and focus on departments of history, literature, philosophy, mathematics and theology.

In a piece published in *The Wall Street Journal* a few weeks prior to Devereaux's essay, St. John's University Legal Studies student Danielle Zito (2023) commented provocatively

that the “liberal arts are dead,” and, after citing daunting statistics that show precipitous declines in the numbers of humanities majors in recent decades, she argued that “college students are looking for a strong return on investment,” and that it is “not there with liberal arts”(Zito). While Zito acknowledged that the liberal arts create “well-rounded people”—a bland understatement— she blames the so-called illiberal left and their propensity toward the study of DEI and Marxist indoctrination for the decline. Such tiresome arguments are dauntingly present in a wide variety of right-leaning rhetorics.

Among the many arguments marshalled in favor of cuts to liberal arts programs is the idea that as obtaining an education at a college or university becomes more and more expensive, students need to see clear paths to future careers. If they do not, they run the risk of not being able to, among other things, take on the daunting task of paying off their extensive student loan debts. This sentiment alongside the “caricature of the college educated barista” mentioned earlier are powerful representations of collective anxieties, and they are most frequently associated with those graduates who hold liberal arts degrees (Thomposon, 2016). The fear, then, is that studying certain things in college will leave you poor and in debt—worse off than if you had never gone.

While these fears are overstated, it’s hard to discredit them entirely. College is more expensive than it has ever been, and rises in tuition costs show no signs of abating. While students and their families invest and borrow more and more money to go to school, they want to know that there will be a job at the end of their program. The connection to student poverty is twofold—there is the actual financial sacrifice made to obtain a college education and then there is the fear of poverty that looms large for those who are not in highly specific majors—a fear that is necessarily more intense for students that do not have financial safety nets in the form of family money.

For those of us in curriculum development in the liberal arts, the pressure to produce curricula that is hyper-focused on helping students find meaningful and lucrative employment such that the enormous financial and material sacrifices they are making “pay off” is enormous. Yet, as Sarah Wasserman (2023) lamented, there is something lost in not also encouraging students to study what they love, not telling them to follow their passions and bliss, and not insisting that we all acknowledge the truth that many do not end up in positions that map specifically to their courses of study in college (Wasserman).

As I describe above, I was a first-generation college student who studied English literature in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and I did so because I loved it. By the time I graduated, I was pregnant, broke, and in student-loan debt. I felt completely unprepared to figure out how to get a job, yet I did know that I gained a lot from my liberal arts degree. While I was fortunate enough to get a position at an under-resourced elementary school in Philadelphia for two years before pursuing graduate school, my salary was 24k a year, and I was supporting a family of three. Thus, I feel the tension of this problem acutely. How can we retain the sense of wonder, passion, and fulfillment of education for its own sake while making sure students see a way out of poverty, the leg up that is implicitly promised, or, at the very least, see college as a prospect that will not leave them poor and unemployable? How can we create curricula that combines creativity and passion with job-readiness skills? Is it possible?

In this essay, I attempt to answer this question by presenting a framework that seeks to guide the creation of such curricula. This framework involves:

- Embracing interdisciplinarity
- Leaving ample room for play, vulnerability, exploration, and self-discovery
- Including opportunities for reflections on a wide variety of potential futures
- Having clear, career-oriented student learning outcomes (SLOs) that map onto current job ads and follow key industry trends

In what follows, I explicate each of these features and offer readers guiding questions to ask if they'd like to explore the possibilities therein. To illustrate this framework, I also offer the example of two courses that follow its features: "Writing in the Health Sciences" and "Writing as a Way of Healing"—two interdisciplinary courses I have developed at my home institution in the English department. In these classes, I help students to imagine a wide variety of future careers while also leaving them space to be exploratory, to discover new passions, and to imagine more than one version of their future selves. Courses like these, I argue, have a shot at helping students to consider the kinds of jobs they might fill while also retaining learning for its own sake.

### **Embracing interdisciplinarity**

For the purposes of this essay, I operationalize interdisciplinarity as the blending of more than one discipline in the pursuit of new knowledge. While it's beyond the scope of the current argument, it is worth parsing varying and contested definitions of this term and the related terms "multidisciplinarity" in which fields contribute their own independently developed ideas or products to a larger team and "transdisciplinarity" in which traditional disciplinary boundaries are transcended and people work together across disciplinary lines at all stages of a problem, a design sprint, or pursuit.

In the framework I'm delineating here, the idea is that more than one field of study can be blended in the creation of a course that fits squarely within the humanities, yet makes it clear how and where it is relevant beyond humanistic epistemologies and methodologies. That is, I see interdisciplinarity in the context of humanistic course design as an imperative to carefully and strategically signpost how and where the issues and problems that animate the creation of a course to begin with are best illuminated via humanistic lenses. Yet such courses should also make it clear that finding innovative inquiries and creative solutions within humanist frameworks also requires attention to other disciplinary vantages. Doing so requires pointing out explicitly how and where other fields of study and the basic epistemological assumptions on which they rest, intersect with, complicate, and enrich such inquiries and solutions. It is a way of approaching course design that insists on humanist vantage points that are steeped in the deep appreciation for other ways of knowing and pragmatic approaches to engaging with such diverse epistemologies.

For example, for this term (spring 2024), I used my research background in the rhetoric of health and medicine and writing in the health sciences to design a "Writing as a Way of Healing" course under the auspices of an existing course—ENG 301: Advanced Writing—at

the mid-sized, R1 state university where I work. As the description below makes clear, the class is explicitly interdisciplinary. It draws on several disciplines to consider a central set of questions that are of concern to the humanities in general and to writing studies specifically:

In this class, we will explore writing as a way of healing—an interdisciplinary movement that spans the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences. While some have theorized expressive writing as capable of healing a wide variety of physical and emotional ailments, others have cautioned that encouraging self-discourse of painful memories is deeply problematic, voyeuristic, and can lead to retraumatization. Our inquiries will lead us to consider the implications of therapeutic methods, pedagogical approaches, and advocacy work that rely on individuals testifying to trauma experiences in narrative arcs—on individuals “telling their stories”—in order to determine: a) whether or not the traction gained for related causes are adequately weighed against potential psychic distress and vulnerability incurred by speakers themselves; b) whether or not these points of departure for writers and thinkers lead to responsible and judicious citizenship and strong ethos; and c) whether or not there is a relationship between speakers’ demographic information/social capital and the likelihood that they will experience/succumb to an invitation or imperatives to disclose. In other words, we’ll take up questions like: Who is asked to disclose, in what contexts, for what purposes? and Who is the audience of these disclosures, what does the speaker gain or lose through these procedures; what do audiences gain or lose through these disclosures? and how do personal narrative disclosure arcs hold up to complex nonlinear realities?

This class is meant to convey to a wide audience of students that they can gain an understanding of a complex problem from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives. The title, too, is meant to signal to potential employers and internship providers that students have learned specific genres and skills that can be ported into the workplace. Implicitly, there is an indication that regardless of their professional aspirations, they will be able to find relevance in the discussions we have. In this class, moreover, I emphasize the real-world contexts in which such knowledge of the promises and pitfalls of writing as a way of healing might be relevant. For those going into social work, psychology, and teaching at any level, of course, the connections are clear. Yet our discussions in this class also veer into the territory of how valuable it can be to think about whether or not to disclose your own past to potential audiences in a wide variety of contexts, such as workplace settings. We discuss how disclosure—particularly of trauma experiences—has political dimensions that are worth parsing. In one of their major projects, students work with a small group of their peers to host a “writing as healing” workshop at a local community center, mental health support space, or senior center. This workshop gives them a specific instance of client work to discuss in interviews later on.

This class also allows for the kind of intellectual curiosity and learning for its own sake that has long been a luxury in humanities frameworks yet has also come under scrutiny when students need to make difficult decisions on how to spend their time in college (e.g., to maximize their investment of time and money). This is a class in which students can articulate how they might put the new knowledge they gain to use and have space for creativity.

When approaching the creation of a course, here are some guiding questions through which to similarly build out interdisciplinary potential:

1. What are the central questions I want to explore with my students?

2. What problems does my course explore?
3. What other disciplinary lenses could be useful in examining these questions and problems?

Asking these questions might lead to a list of other disciplines from which you can draw inspiration, readings, screenings, texts, and assignments to enrich course design in the humanities. Doing so will make describing the value of such classes to diverse stakeholders more feasible.

### **Leaving Ample Room for Play, Vulnerability, Exploration, and Self-Discovery**

Even as a course embraces interdisciplinarity, room should be left for students to play around with ideas, to try out vulnerable positions in a safe space, to explore and interrogate their own thinking, to discover more about who they are and, more importantly, who they want to be.

An assignment in my writing-as-a-way-of-healing class encapsulates these ideas well. In it, I ask students to do follow the prompt below:

#### ***Project One—Dismantling Narrative Arcs Project with Presentation***

##### *The Basics:*

In very plain language, this project asks you to tell a story about your life—one, perhaps, that reiterates some event or symbolically represents some aspect of your life from which you wish to heal. However, instead of telling us a neat story about what happened and how it felt, and instead of offering an anecdote the illustrates the issue, you’ll create a meaningful and engaging assemblage of images, sound, and voiceover to share with the group.

##### *The Aim:*

Writing studies scholars have cautioned against using writing prompts that are meant to heal writers as such prompts can be, as Lynn Worsham explained “resolutely tied to liberal humanist notions of self, agency, and authentic self-expression” (177). Yet, as we also know, various empirical studies in the hard and social sciences do note a connection between writing and healing a wide variety of physical and mental ailments. Still, what Worsham is concerned about is “narrative fetishism,” which “refers to the construction of a narrative that is consciously or unconsciously designed to purge the traces of the trauma that calls the narrative into being in the first place” (178). Writing as healing is often taken up in a way that suggests *narration* as the way to address the underlying *trauma* from which one might hope to heal. Worsham wants us to think critically about narratives and the tendency for narrative fetishism to push up against storytelling and complicate its supposedly social role in knowledge creation. Critical questions emerge:

- Do narratives intended to heal actually cause narcissism?
- Are such narratives merely self-indulgent?
- Do narratives intended to heal help writers avoid the difficult work involved in addressing their emotional problems—their “problems with living”?



- And, as Janice Carello and Lisa Butler argue, can such narratives lead to retraumatization?

Certainly, many things we'll read and screen this term will make compelling arguments for writing's potential to heal what ails; however, I want us to start out with some skepticism about narratives to enrich our conversations and your projects. Part of the issue with narrative, to my mind, is the fact that most people associate them with linear arcs. Even the rise of experimental works in fields like creative nonfiction did little to stem the tide of neat narrative arcs. Fitting an account into an arc, of course, can be pleasurable—especially for those of us accustomed to consuming other narratives that follow similar patterns and employ analogous tropes. Still, it is important to think analytically about how an arc might press what we might call a *hermeneutic imperative* and *rigid form* onto an account of the self and one's life events (let's call this a template of sorts that demands specific dispositions toward events and particular interpretations of these events).

Within this rich framing, your work on this project begins. I am asking you to push back against narrative arcs—to dismantle them—and to explore the possibilities for giving an account of your life in a nonlinear and more capacious manner. Your project will emerge in fits and starts and will conceal as much as it reveals. You'll craft and curate a collection of sounds, images, text, and video to symbolically recast some issue or event from which you wish to heal. Your project, which you'll present to the rest of us, will keep us all intrigued and guessing. It will allow you to reveal only as much of your personal life as you wish.

*Invention: To get started, ask yourself:*

- What are some painful things I've experienced that I wish to heal from?
- If I had to convey those experiences without telling the story in a narrative arc, how would I do that?
  - What images, soundbites, video clips, animations, or words would symbolically recast my story?
  - How can I reveal only what I'm comfortable sharing while still getting the benefit of composing as a way of healing?

*Rubric:*

This project is entirely an experiment and will not be graded harshly. However, to give you an idea of how I'll grade you, here is a brief and flexible rubric:

Writer uses some combination of sound, image, text, and video to create a meaningful assemblage. (10)

Presentation is approximately 5 to 10 minutes-worth of material and is clearly polished and ready for an audience. (10)

Total: (20)

Please feel free to visit office hours or to make an appointment if you wish for me to review your project in advance of the due date.

Have fun with this assignment!

I am really looking forward to seeing and hearing what you come up with. As the design of this project shows, students are asked to engage in fairly advanced, abstract, intellectual work. The entire notion of symbolically recasting puts them in a space of exploration that is part and parcel of humanistic study. They are invited into the possibility of passionate, creative, intellectual thought and analysis; they are able to indulge in self-exploration at what is usually a key point in their development as young adults.

Moreover, the fact that the project is multimodal often means that students play around with multimodal design tools and programs—skills and experiences they can later share as assets with internship providers and potential employers. Also key to this assignment’s success is the fact that students in the class share their projects with each other—an exercise that I have seen lead to empathy-building, mutual respect, and diplomatic communication.

For those interested in using assignments that similarly invite play, vulnerability, exploration, and self-discovery, the following questions might be generative:

1. How can I invite my students to think with me on the complex issues, topics, and problems my course takes up?
2. What kinds of prompts will allow my students to think critically about their own relationships to this topic?
3. How can I allow for a wide variety of interpretations of this assignment such that all students, regardless of background, see a place for themselves in what is being asked?
4. What kinds of tools do I want my students to feel invited to try out?

Asking these questions could lead to assignment prompts that allow students the space to engage in the deeply creative and intellectual work that often feels like it is missing when there is too much emphasis on “job readiness,” yet the use of multimodal tools and the complexity of building their digital projects does speak to job readiness all the same.

### **Including Opportunities for Reflections on a Wide Variety of Potential Futures**

It is also important to design some courses that really spell out precisely what a student can gain professionally from taking them. With the goal of offering students an explicit indication of what they’ll get out of a class professionally, I designed a course called “Writing in the Health Sciences” under the course title “English 222: Introduction to Professional Writing.” So that students in various disciplines and with a variety of career goals can see a place for themselves in the course, I describe it thus:

There are a wide variety of writing and research-related tasks that those in the health professions (conceived broadly) might undertake, such as, preparing healthcare records, evidence-based reports, and patient-education materials. While those who write in healthcare contexts do so for a variety of audiences, purposes, and occasions, all medical writing should be clear, up to date, correct, and culturally appropriate. This course will overview professional writing best practices through a focus on professional writing in health and medical contexts. This class is suited to a wide variety of students:

students in English studies will have a better sense of potential careers and genres in medical writing and medical editing while students in health sciences will have a stronger sense of the kinds of writing they might undertake in their careers.

Using industry standards from professional organizations like the American Medical Writer's Association (AMWA) and exploring a wide variety of career options in health advocacy, public health, medical writing, and medical editing, this class also speaks directly to those going into clinical professions by overviewing the kinds of writing and communication they can expect to do in their careers.

In this class, I design lessons that constantly vacillate between thinking about the student audience as future clinicians versus thinking of them as people who are considering a range of health-communications-related career paths. Rather than this duality creating dissonance, it keeps the tone of the course career-focused yet open to a host of possible futures. For students who are in English, communication, or similar fields, I find that speaking explicitly about career paths gets them thinking about what they might want to do, even if that career is not related to health communication. For those who have always envisioned themselves as going into clinical work, I find that some of them start to rethink the kinds of contributions they might make to the worlds of health and medicine beyond becoming nurses, doctors, physician's assistants, etc. For both groups, the course content empowers them to see a wide array of possibilities for themselves in the future—options that go beyond the title of their academic majors, prospects that speak to their interests and passions and strengths.

Others interested in similarly designing courses that have practical professional applications for a wide range of students—ones with the capacity to inspire students to think about the variety of things they could do with their lives—might ask themselves the following questions:

1. What different kinds of careers might my class prepare students to take on?
2. What are 3 to 5 majors on campus who might find my course useful as they prepare for their future careers?
3. What are specific genres of professional writing that are relevant to my areas of expertise?

Asking these questions could help to clarify the kinds of courses that help students to imagine and envision a range of potential futures for themselves in ways that go beyond obvious options—courses that help them to see that they could apply for entry-level positions in a wide variety of industries and professions.

### **Having Clear, Career-Oriented Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that Map onto Current Job Ads and Follow Key Industry Trends**

In thinking through how we can create curricula that are responsive to job-readiness imperatives while also retaining all that is worthwhile in higher education beyond job training, such as the possibility for passionate exploration, play, and self-discovery—keys, as I argue above, to the development of an enlightened, judicious, and thoughtful citizen—it is important to think about learning outcomes that will clearly communicate such values. It is essential to have intentionally clear, career-oriented student learning outcomes (SLOs) that map onto

current job ads and follow key industry trends so that students themselves can see the value in the courses. If students recognize the relationship between their courses and their future careers, they will be better able to articulate those connections.

For my writing in the health sciences course, the learning outcomes include the following:

- Examine conventions in professional writing genres.
- Compose professional texts across modes, audiences, and purposes.
- Exhibit rhetorical awareness and cultural competence when composing in professional writing genres.

Naturally, writing SLOs is an answer to the question: what do I want my students to be able to do or produce after they've taken this course? Having clear, assessable end goals helps to give shape to a worthwhile, meaningful course. That said, it is also helpful to think of SLOs as places to signal job-readiness skills that will be part of the course. Considering what job ads are asking for and the keywords potential employers are using can be a powerful way to signal that the course you are teaching is meant to prepare students specifically for jobs. Moreover, even the course title itself can do the work of communicating job-centric content in the courses we teach.

Those interested in similarly composing SLOs that are career-oriented, map onto current job ads, and follow key industry trends should ask the following:

1. What kinds of jobs are recent alums getting? What are their titles? What do they do in their day-to-day lives?
2. Reading through job ads that are related to the courses you teach, what are keywords you notice? What skills do employers want to see, and how are those skills articulated?
3. What are specific things you want your students to be able to do or produce at the end of your course?

Asking these questions might ensure that the SLOs will tell a compelling story of how what students do and learn in your course helps them to be prepared to take on new opportunities beyond college.

## **Conclusion**

In the *Avenue Q* song (Lopez & Marx 2003) I referenced in the opening of this essay, the lyrics are as follows:

Four years of college  
And plenty of knowledge  
Have earned me this useless degree!  
I can't pay the bills yet  
'Cause I have no skills yet

The world is a big scary place!  
But somehow I can't shake  
The feeling I might make  
A difference to the human race!

And while this song is meant to be humorous, it resonates with the issues and problems with which I have grappled in this piece. How can we inspire students to think creatively, openly, and critically—to engage with the most challenging facets of life in the context of late capitalism, toxic political rhetorics, climate change, and ever-increasing global injustices and conflicts while also helping them to see specific jobs they could qualify for and career paths they might follow? Students need the “plenty of knowledge” and the habits of mind that are earned through deep engagement with humanistic and social scientific fields, yet they also need those “skills” that will help them to “pay the bills.”

The son of a Philadelphia union carpenter and first-generation American, my dad was not able to attend a four-year-degree program. He started working as a young teen to help support his nine siblings, he became a father when he was 19, and he was the father of four by the time he was 25. As a baby boomer, though, he was still part of a generation that could, with the right mix of intelligence, luck, and tenacity, pull themselves up by the proverbially bootstraps. Once a trackman for Amtrak, he is now in upper management at an engineering firm that specializes in rail transportation systems. He recently shared that a bright, young female engineer from India he is working with was asking about his children. When he shared that one is a writing professor, another a singer/songwriter, and another a film professor, she immediately commented on how her parents would never have let her major in such frivolous things.

Those of us tasked with telling compelling stories about the career trajectories our humanities and social sciences degree programs make possible have an uphill battle when it comes to dispelling the myth that the only way to get a reliable and upwardly mobile career is to go into a STEM, business, or health sciences programs and that other paths are indulgent wastes of time or experiences that are reserved for those with hefty financial safety nets. The pressure on our most vulnerable students to major in STEM and health careers is only going to increase. Moreover, the very viability of the humanities and social sciences is at risk with the increasingly draconian budget cuts that so many of our institutions face. If we are to survive these daunting times, we must find better ways to tell stories about what our programs specifically train people to do. We need to create curricula that map onto specific skillsets that employers are seeking. And, most challengingly, we need to do these things while retaining the capacity for the intellectual curiosity, passion, and joy that brought so many of us to study in such fields to begin with. Attending to these complex tasks will require a lot of thought, mindful preparation, and experimentation. A framework like the one I have described in this essay is a starting point. If such a framework were to drive curriculum development in the humanities and social sciences moving forward, perhaps students like the Vietnamese-American student I describe above would be able to articulate the pragmatic payoffs of our programs. The relevant and specific skills gained, the potential for employability, and the

possibility of emerging from poverty would be more obvious. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to work in such programs for many years have seen the robust career trajectories of our alumni as their skills and habits of mind help them to quickly and impressively become successful leaders in a wide variety of industries. Making such pathways more legible in curriculum design would allow even more students to thrive materially and professionally.

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