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**THE EMPLOYABILITY NARRATIVES OF LIBERAL ARTS  
UNDERGRADUATES: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY**

A Dissertation in

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the career-related stories of juniors and seniors in the College of Liberal Arts, proposing a theoretical construct of the liberal arts employability narrative. Liberal arts students were chosen because their diverse, foundational majors are less geared toward singular occupational paths. A grounded theory approach was taken to document the student perspective, allowing theory to generate naturally from a close analysis of spoken words. This research was primarily qualitative because nascent literature in the field on graduate employability, especially employability narratives, warranted an exploratory approach. Two short surveys concluded interviews to briefly investigate student employability readiness from a different vantage point. Interview findings suggest that students construct employability narratives with an emphasis on dispositional attributes. Narrative expression included exploring self and future possibilities, packaging diverse interests, and distinguishing candidate appeal. Several adopted strategies to present the multi-faceted self for optimal self-marketing. Persistent concerns included the perceived stigmatization of the liberal arts degree in society at large. The findings in this study inform the literature on student perceptions of employability in the liberal arts context, an area practically significant for university staff, administration, faculty, students, families, and employers.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“What our servicemen and women want, more than anything else, is the assurance of satisfactory employment upon their return to civil life. The first task after the war is to provide employment for them and for our demobilized workers. The goal after the war should be the maximum utilization of our human and material resources.”*

– Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1944), upon signing of the G.I. Bill

### Historical Context

The term “employability” was first popularized during the 1940s in the rallying of individual contribution to the war effort (Wilton, 2011). As war recruitment posters told men to enlist and women “we can do it,” the implied question of the time became: are you or are you not employable? The human capital input measured by individual work status was either captured for the shared benefit of the nation or not. Upon their return, the government rewarded veterans for their service with the G.I. Bill that increased the affordability of college and graduate school, easing them through the transitions of war to school to working life. College enrollment grew dramatically, as did the number of students choosing one of the many liberal arts undergraduate majors (Kimball, 2012). The stark, dichotomous war-time conception of employability did not last, nor did widespread perceptions of job security or the mostly male workplace. Although privileges granted by the G.I. Bill were tacitly understood and interpreted to support White male veterans (Murray, 2002), women never fully returned home, increasingly participating in the workforce and higher education, and college enrollment rates of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians rose concurrently from post-war to the present (Fry, 2011).

Since post-World War II, the structure of the labor market has changed dramatically. Rapid technological innovation propelled an increase in skilled labor and the workforce gradually shifted in the transition from a manufacturing to service-based economy. Millions of jobs have been shipped overseas (Bhagwati, Panagariya, & Srinivasan, 2004). In the 1950s, the U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor reported that 60% of U.S. workers were unskilled; by 1997, only 20% were (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). At present, opportunities of low-, middle-, and high-skilled workers are examined with little reference to “the unskilled.” Between 2008 and 2018, the U.S. labor market is expected to add 15.3 million jobs, with 63% of all jobs requiring postsecondary training (United States Department of Labor, 2009).

Employability is discussed here in the context of the social and economic turmoil that has shaped public discourse in recent decades. This discussion underscores the

magnitude of change since wartime job recruitment. The following historical narrative sensitizes the reader to the position of the undergraduate with a liberal arts major.

### **The 1990s: Rethinking Careers in a New Economy**

The 1990s began in recession with the youth unemployment rate (ages 16 to 24) peaking in 1992 at 14.5% (United States Department of Labor, 2014). This decade became known as generally prosperous for the United States, but constant demographic and economic change, a portent of the future, shaped the school-to-work transition. Rising immigration, particularly from Latin America, infused schools and workplaces with the dynamic of ethnic diversity, and the percentage of Whites in the labor force fell from 88% in 1980 to 84% in 2000 (Kalleberg & Marsden, 2013). Other changes complicated the struggle to achieve a labor market advantage. While the number of students entering college rose, so too did their accumulation of debt (Mettler, 2014). Signaling both progress and stagnation, the employment and earnings gap between men and women narrowed, but the same gap between Blacks and non-Blacks did not (Kalleberg & Marsden). Imperiling progress of the 'at risk' population, the likelihood of long-term future unemployment increased markedly for youth out of work at least three months (Connolly, Micklewright, & Nickell, 1992). Full-time entry into the labor market began taking significantly longer, a change characterized as delayed adulthood by Freeman and Blanchflower (2000). Ryan (2001) captured the employment uncertainty of youth in his synthesis of the literature from this time: "Early working life in the United States is depicted as a 'moratorium period,' containing extensive 'churning,' 'milling,' and 'floundering'" (p. 56).

The U.S. labor market distinguished itself from other advanced countries with high job mobility, both between jobs and between employment and joblessness (Ryan, 2001). In this fluid context, the added concern of outsourced jobs disrupted the historic assumption that a postsecondary education inevitably led to job placement. Spence and Hlatshwayo (2012), however, contend that evidence of employment reduction pointed even more toward labor-saving technology than outsourcing. In their anticipation of "real life," labor market entrants needed to consider both offshore competition and the possibility their jobs would become obsolete.

Concern for structural unemployment grew throughout the nineties as experts debated a possible mismatch between worker skills and employer needs. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills

(SCANS) initiated this conversation by studying the basic skills required for success in the modern workplace (North & Worth, 2004). Their large-scale survey of business owners, union officials, public employees, managers, and private-sector workers resulted in the identification of key workplace competencies. Although the report focused on K-12 education, the relevance of SCANS findings extended to higher education as all schools were called upon to develop students for a more complex workplace (Jennings, 2010).

In the late nineties, several scholars sought to theorize and elucidate contemporary paradigms of career development. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) coined the term “boundaryless career” to describe the flexibility of a career extending well beyond traditional organizational boundaries determined by a single employer. Mirvis and Hall (1996) discussed the concept of the “protean career” driven by the individual rather than the organization. A few years later, Cohen and Mallon (1999) explained that the absence of a traditional career structure could make way for the “portfolio career,” enabling the individual to work for many employers and eschewing traditional reliance on one. Career development was to be managed as it once was by the town blacksmith; that is, manufactured by the individual with the assumption of privatized risk.

### **The 2000s: Reframing Education in Turbulent Times**

In education, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be historically marked as the era of accountability given the widespread attention to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), a federal education reform bill intended to hold schools accountable for student performance by tying allocation of funds to standardized test results. While the act did not last, talk of education reform and assessment did. The collaborative “Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills” by Casner-Lotto, Rosenblum, and Wright (2009) reported that student achievement should be assessed according to critical problem-solving skills needed in the modern workplace rather than knowledge of facts. Employers embraced the concept of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and regarded generic employability skills, like good communication, to be of equal and sometimes greater value than vocationally specific knowledge (Wilton, 2011). This mindset directed some attention toward teaching generalizable skills in training and education at all levels, but did not result in full-scale change.

As stakeholders continued to discuss what constituted 21<sup>st</sup> century employability, institutions of higher education had their own concerns and priorities. Reflecting

demographic changes at large, Kelly (2005) projected that, increasingly, college students would *not* be White, born in the United States, or native speakers of English. As a byproduct of mass higher education, reports came in that a “sizeable fraction” of college student bodies needed remedial coursework (Kelly). These demographic shifts challenged the notion of higher education as serving ‘the elite.’ Feeling pressure to respond to the preferences of diverse students and their paying families, colleges and universities increasingly allowed grade inflation and tolerance of late work, trends employers criticized for contributing to the deterioration of self-discipline in a dynamic explained by Bok (2009).

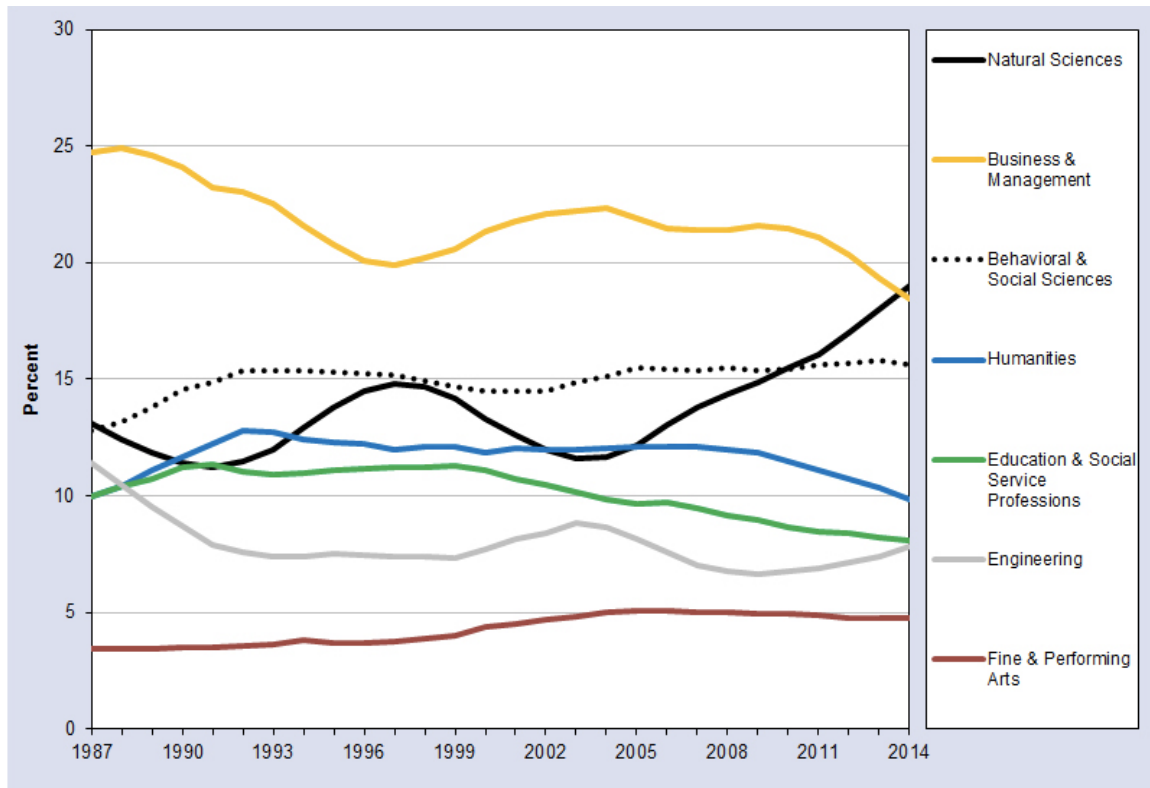
Though students who may not have been categorized as “college bound” a generation ago attempted and successfully persisted in college, labor market woes worsened upon graduation. The Great Recession began in 2007 and continued until 2009 (Seefeldt & Graham, 2014). A study of recession-era college graduates found the majority to be disappointed with their post-college salary, working for hourly wages, and pessimistic that their generation would be more prosperous than the one before (Stone, Van Horn, & Zukin, 2012). Forty-eight percent reported that college had not prepared them to look for a full-time job, though they more favorably reported college preparation for job performance (Stone et al.).

### **The 2010s: Higher Education in Flux and Vocationalism of the Baccalaureate Degree**

By 2010, Belfield (2013) reported parallel concerns had risen over mounting student debt and the increased enrollment in and proliferation of for-profit colleges and universities. Applicants seemed attracted to the institutional propaganda that focused on “career launching,” signaling the marketing effectiveness of tying higher education to employability (Roosevelt, 2006). These institutions faced criticism for the “growing commercialization of higher education and the corresponding decline of liberal education” (Roosevelt, 2006, p. 1405). Widened access to higher education continued, Mettler (2014) argued, in spite of concerns about the return on investment for students from less-advantaged backgrounds. Underrepresented minorities persisted in higher education enrollment and, as a percentage increase, outpaced White male students (Krymkowski & Mintz, 2011). Rates of majors in the liberal arts had remained relatively stable and majors in business rose according to Koc (2010), who also described the college hiring market as broadly divided into two categories: career-oriented majors,

such as engineering and business, and liberal arts majors, characteristically broader and more academically oriented.

A more recent analysis from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2016) shows a marked increase in undergraduate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) majors with post-recession declines in both business and humanities majors (e.g., English, History, and Philosophy):



*Figure 1.* Share in all bachelor's degrees awarded in selected academic fields (1987-2014). Reprinted from Humanities Indicators, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March, 2016. Retrieved October 28, 2016 from <http://HumanitiesIndicators.org>. Copyright 2016 from American Academy of Arts and Science. Reprinted with permission.

Recent popular nonfiction depicting higher education in crisis has reevaluated the purpose and future of the postsecondary degree on a regular basis:

- “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses” (Arum & Roksa, 2011)
- “Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities” (Nussbaum, 2012)
- “Financing American Higher Education in the Era of Globalization” (Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012)

- “College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students” (Selingo, 2013)
- “Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream” (Mettler, 2014)
- “College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of Higher Education” (Craig, 2015)
- “In Defense of Liberal Education” (Zakaria, 2016).

Among the wide range of economic and pedagogical concerns these authors raise, a critical premise of several is the perceived shift toward a vocational orientation of the baccalaureate degree. In response to the push toward technical undergraduate majors, a counterargument supported the breadth of a liberal arts major as a foundation for long-term employability. Zakaria (2016) argued that “liberal education should give people the skills that will help them get ready for their sixth job, not their first job” (p. 79).

Literature in the field of higher education similarly deconstructed recent trends, such as the STEM focus, a movement toward “favored” technical disciplines as reported by Nussbaum (2012) and Zakaria (2016). In a comparison of STEM and non-STEM undergraduate majors using data from a nationally representative longitudinal study, Xu (2013) found positive career outcomes for individuals with occupations that closely matched their major, a more common occurrence in STEM. Adding to the college major debate, Supiano (2013) and Koc (2010) argued that majors do affect starting salaries, with liberal arts majors experiencing a significant disadvantage in compensation, especially early on; however, they mostly continued on to graduate school, eventually gaining a labor market advantage by doing so (Koc).

The rapid emergence of free online coursework further disrupted the traditional framework of higher education. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) simultaneously made it possible for students to access free content worldwide and for colleges and universities to integrate inexpensive coursework as a cost-cutting measure. Initial analysis of MOOC course-taking trends revealed that participants were, as expected, internationally diverse, but they were also consistently professional, countering the notion that MOOCs would broadly transform the education of impoverished learners (Macleod, Haywood, Woodgate, & Alkhatnai, 2015). In comparing MOOCs to earlier systems of e-learning, Clarke (2013) found that in spite of the challenges of a high drop-out rate and uncertainties over valid and reliable assessment, experimentation with this digitalized education would likely endure. MOOCs made it possible for people to self-direct their professional learning and development, boosting the employable skills of those who chose to partake (Clarke).

A more gradual trend in higher education, also relevant to employability, has occurred in the increase of honors colleges, a marketing measure undertaken by universities to recruit high-achieving students by offering the added value of exclusive distinction and services, such as small class sizes or study abroad support (Kimball, 2014). For participating students, the honors college offers “the opportunities of an Ivy League education at a state university price” and appears to positively affect their critical thinking, mathematics, and cognitive development (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007). Critics of the honors college question the stratified system that results in top students consuming a disproportionate share of resources (Selingo, 2002). Kimball (2014) noted that honors programs and colleges have sought to emulate traditional features of a small liberal arts college, but their implicit elitism differentiates them, complicating the egalitarian mission.

For liberal arts students, the converging social and economic trends of the last few decades reflect a need for them to, at minimum, proactively develop themselves professionally. They can no longer rely on the merits of their grade point average, undergraduate transcript, or job application, for they are vulnerable to the macroeconomic conditions of a volatile labor market (Wilson & Yontz, 2015). Students need to shrewdly socialize themselves into the world of work, often virtually, to acquire and sustain satisfying employment (Redmond, 2006). The question remains whether they understand this implicit expectation, a byproduct of the paradigm shift that gradually transpired from just after World War II, when college was seen as preparation for a single career, to the present reality in which college offers the foundation for employability with a few qualifiers.

### **Problem Statement**

Employability results from a dynamic interaction between individual potential and patterns in micro- and macro-economics. Problematic confusion arises when the vast concept is oversimplified, such as blame-the-victim ideations that exaggerate individual inadequacy by ignoring external constraints, criticism raised by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), Simmons (2009), and Turner (2014). In spite of widespread attention to the topic, few clear solutions have been proposed to integrate employability systemically in U.S. higher education. The following section details college graduate struggles with unemployment, underemployment, debt, and access to opportunity, concluding with the absence of the student voice in employability literature.



## Conceptualizing Graduate Employability

Employability defines one's *potential* for employment, not job status or even patterns of job status, so the contribution of higher education to employability is not easily quantifiable. Still, appraising individual investment in the baccalaureate degree is of great interest to many, as mentioned previously in the study delineating financial prospects by undergraduate major (Xu, 2013). Recent college graduates between the ages of 21 and 24 have an unemployment rate of 7.2% and an underemployment rate of 14.9%, higher than pre-recession levels as they "idle" and accept low-wages in positions like retail and food service (Davis, Kimball, & Gould, 2015). High tuition has made debt a driving factor shaping academic and career decisions (Rothstein & Rouse, 2011).

Though widened access to higher education has not been deterred by seemingly prohibitive tuition costs, equality of opportunity remains troubling for the pursuit of *graduate* employability, a subjective term that implies a positional advantage through professional networks and credentialing (Tomlinson, 2008). U.K. researchers (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013; Redmond, 2006) argue that working-class students have a harder time securing good job placements because they lack access to the resources and contacts that affluent students are primed to exploit. Students struggling to pay tuition may work part-time hours that do not allow for the benefit of time and flexibility to socialize themselves into sought-after networks. Redmond's ethnographic study (2006) concluded that "widening participation students" (from nontraditional social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds) participate less in non-academic aspects of college life. Tomlinson (2012) cautioned that "mass higher education may be perpetuating the types of structural inequalities it was intended to alleviate" (p. 411) and Carnevale and Strohl (2013) further describe the system as "more and more complicit as a passive agent in the systematic reproduction of white racial privilege across generations" (p. 7). Plausible gaps in graduate employability were found in a five-year interview study at a mid-western university, as Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) identified patterns linking social integration in college with economic stratification in the labor market.

Scholars portray employability as the modern replacement for job security (Clarke, 2007), but few have rigorously examined the relationship between widening participation in higher education and graduate employability (Redmond, 2006), and none with an explicit focus on liberal arts majors. Mass higher education has benefitted from the egalitarian college-for-all mantra in the U.S., but the post-college reality in a

globalized economy reflects a climate of pressure, anxiety, and competition. With the ubiquity of college-degree holders, Brown and Hesketh (2004) call the self “a key economic resource” with the explanation that “‘who you are’ matters as much as ‘what you know’” (p. 35). Successful students mobilize and position themselves to be at an advantage in a competitive market. In her qualitative study of young adults in the 24-34 age bracket, Silva (2013) claims that access to stable employment, not numeric age, is now “the biggest predictor of a normative transition to adulthood” (p. 160).

### **The Critical Need for a Coherent Narrative of Employability**

According to Dewey (1929), “reflective inquiry starts with a problematic situation” (p. 189). Graduate employability, with its nebulous flux, is problematic both for theorists and for those seeking to understand and apply it to their own lives. It is unclear how students attend to their employability throughout their undergraduate studies and effectively market themselves as the need arises. Qualitative inquiry could reveal patterns in how students internally construct emergent narratives of employability in the context of college coursework, activities, and socialization, accessing and affirming their “social constructions of reality” in storied thought (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Narrative in this context refers to the improvised story crafted as students make sense of their professional potential. Narratives are both interactive and personal; they emerge as socially embedded, but they are also individualized and expressed in first-person language, as in ‘my selling points.’ Students may rehearse their ‘elevator pitch,’ the recognizable vignette of an employability narrative, but a marketable storyline is more integrative and expansive, addressing a vast range of factors contributing to employment potential. Singer and Plagov (2004) describe the critical narrative of self as “our capacity to translate information processed cognitively into ‘storied thought’” and “our means of linking specific past experiences to the enduring concerns of the personality system, as expressed through a sense of coherent and ongoing narrative identity” (p. 123).

This narrative of self would appear to aid students who select majors with limited occupational pathways and less market credibility. Advocates of an employability agenda in higher education point to evidence of less relevant coursework and the need for interconnectivity and work-related learning to replace insular academic thinking (Ehiyazaryan, 2009; Rae, 2007). The tension between “practical” and “academic” work that would inhibit students’ understanding of how the two overlap is evidenced in this statement:

“For universities and their academic staff, a deeper cultural problem, of the introverted nature of academic organizations, may exist. The prevailing culture of academic organizations is often to focus inwards, on the organization of academic structures and on the subject discipline of research and course curricula. The production of academic knowledge tends to privilege theory and conceptual knowledge over practical application, which results in the term ‘academic’ becoming a pejorative term of abuse that may also mean ‘irrelevant’” (Rae, 2007, p. 608).

Constructing one’s employability narrative does require some support. Clarke’s (2007) interviews with mid-career professionals revealed that few participants were cognizant of what it means to be employable. Many students may be lacking skill in expressing their employability, and attention to this task could be especially helpful for those hoping to gain class mobility through acquisition of a college degree (Tomlinson, 2012). Morrison (2014) writes that class disadvantage could be “successfully packaged” into what Brown and Hesketh (2004) call a “coherent narrative of employability,” but the process of developing and packaging one’s employability requires heightened self-awareness and socialization. This personal development is hampered by evidence suggesting that non-traditional students endure “higher education as a largely marginalizing and fragmentary experience” (Redmond, 2006, p. 126).

Employability narratives are a work in progress, renegotiated to reflect changes in self and circumstance likely to occur throughout adulthood. Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008) found that undergraduates focus on their growth and development but often carry unrealistic expectations of the workplace, a dissonance between understanding of self and the macro-economic reality. Colleges may also fail to direct students to coursework and services that would strengthen their graduate employability. With their own financial interests at stake, Rae (2007) argued that administrators have increased offerings of “trendy courses” at the expense of traditional coursework employers prefer. Fouad (2006) found that only half of students were aware of career services and fewer had used them. Far from the ideal of early career management, Arum and Roksa (2011) pessimistically stated that U.S. postsecondary student success meant “controlling college by shaping schedules, taming professors, and limiting workload” (p. 4).

If the traditional career development paradigm has lost applicability, stories from students in the middle of the postsecondary-to-work transition may help explain what is relevant. Tymon (2013) has questioned whether students are engaged with the topic of

employability and Tomlinson (2008) calls the student viewpoint on this topic “largely under-investigated.” Exploring the fledgling career stories of undergraduates could lead to rich, descriptive themes within narratives illuminating perceived barriers to and facilitative conditions for graduate employability. The narrative approach to qualitative inquiry gives voice to imminent graduates. They have succeeded by persisting in college, but the scope of their employability is still in question. This study aims to establish a baseline of inquiry into how U.S. undergraduates in the liberal arts construct and manage the narrative of their employability.

## **Purpose of Study**

### **Rationale**

The primary purpose of this study is, first, to document College of Liberal Arts (CLA) undergraduates’ storied understanding of employability in the university context and, second, to build a theoretical construct of the employability narrative based on what is heard. Limited research exists on career development perceptions of this general college student population. Liberal arts students were chosen because their diverse majors less likely prepare them for one specific career; to achieve foresight, they must carefully think for themselves how college experiences benefit career trajectories. In the author’s estimation, they will gain self-knowledge from a semi-structured interview focused on career-related experiences and self-insights. Interview questions could prompt participants to clarify thinking about what they want to do and how they will present themselves to future employers. The interview protocol models integrative dialogue that supports higher-order critical thinking and career development. A grounded theory approach is taken to hear, document, and understand student views, generating theory from a close analysis of their words.

This research is primarily qualitative because nascent literature in the field on graduate employability, especially employability narratives, warrants an exploratory approach. However, young adult interviewees may not have the knowledge to address critical dimensions of employability. Narratives are socially constructed, shaped by the interplay of self-efficacy and assets (or capital) in determining possible future selves. A review of historical perspectives informs the reader that employability may depend on dispositional factors outside the consciousness of the young adult.

To fully investigate the lack of clarity about employability narratives and concern for career readiness, two short validated surveys concluded interviews to gauge students' employability readiness: the Dispositional Measure of Employability, developed by Fugate and Kinicki (2008), and the Self-Perceived Employability Scale, developed by Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell (2008). In the final years of college, student anticipation of the transition to work gains momentum and institutional supports become vital. Survey results complement underlying themes in student stories to convey a broader understanding of them. Study findings result in recommended career interventions to bolster the employment potential of all liberal arts undergraduates.

### **Research Questions**

Undergraduate juniors and seniors have successfully persisted in college but only begun the transition to work. Conducting semi-structured interviews reveals ways in which the college experience shapes early conceptions of graduate employability. Capturing the voices of this age group helps to inform and update the theoretical base for contemporary graduate employability, a construct that must adapt to generational shifts in circumstance and perception.

Research questions guiding this study:

1. What is the theory that explains CLA undergraduate juniors and seniors making sense of their employability narrative?
  - a. How do they perceive employability?
  - b. How do they construct their employability narrative?
  - c. How do they manage their employability narrative?
2. What university-based critical influences do students identify as contributing to their employability?
  - a. How do courses contribute to employability development?
  - b. How does work experience contribute to employability development?
  - c. How does extracurricular involvement contribute to employability development?
  - d. How are students informally socialized to develop their employability?

## **Dissertation Relevance and Organization**

This research intends to support incorporating employability as a goal into higher education coursework, student employment, and extracurricular activities. It is relevant to the mission of higher education institutions to the extent that they strive to produce employable graduates with fulfilling work lives. It is also a practical benefit to faculty and counselors thinking about strategies to promote career awareness, development, and readiness. Furthermore, it is a benefit to current and future students wishing for a clear understanding of what it means to be employable and how to articulate that.

This dissertation will be organized according to chapters on a review of the literature, methods, results, supplemental findings, and a concluding discussion. The literature review will begin with a tabular description of employability frameworks followed by analysis of themes underpinning the approach and design of this study.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

*“Hall first noted the emergence of the protean career in 1976, as he saw the beginnings of a shift away from the organizational career to this new orientation. He defined this orientation as: The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of all of the person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc. The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external” (Hall, 1976, p. 201).*

This literature review provides an overview of the theories most relevant to an understanding of graduate employability. Section one synthesizes prominent theoretical frameworks, each with an assumption compatible with Becker's influential human capital theory (1962) of developing individual potential as an economic investment. Section two explores the internal and external factors affecting college student growth and workforce potential. These themes informed the study's interview protocol and interpretation of participant dialogue.

### Theoretical Frameworks of Employability

Many scholars have debated the meaning of employability but few have explored it in the context of developing college-aged students. Those who have undertaken this research have predominantly done so in European countries, especially the United Kingdom, where legislative, policy, and education trends have led to a conceptual embrace of employability, referring to it as “a cornerstone of the New Labor approach to economic and social policy” (Haughton, Jones, Peck, Tickell, & While, 2000, p. 671). The following table summarizes contributions of supply-side theorists who have proposed frameworks of employability in recent decades, listed chronologically to illustrate the conceptual evolution over time.

Table 1

#### *Employability Frameworks*

Authors	Framework
Hillage and Pollard (1998) United Kingdom	<i>Definition:</i> “Employability is about the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment” (p. 12). <i>Approach:</i> Complex interaction of assets, presentation, deployment, and contextual factors.

Authors	Framework
	<p><i>Emphasis:</i> Pragmatic understanding of employability as two-sided (personal circumstances and external factors); government education, and policy focused.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> Established the groundwork for identifying priorities and recommendations for public policy.</p>
<p>Knight and Yorke (2002, 2004) United Kingdom</p>	<p><i>Definition of employability:</i> Identified employability in terms of “Understanding, Skills, Efficacy, and Metacognition” (USEM).</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Focus on embedding employability into higher education curriculum without compromising disciplinary content or academic freedom.</p> <p><i>Emphasis:</i> Employability development in higher education.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> USEM served as a guide to incorporate employability into higher education programs.</p>
<p>Brown &amp; Hesketh (2004)</p>	<p><i>Definition of employability:</i> The relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment.</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Examines employability more subjectively and dependent on contextual factors.</p> <p><i>Emphasis:</i> Employability as an individual attribute that can be improved through education and training.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> Training individuals to proactively manage career development and craft employability narratives for labor market advantage.</p>
<p>Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004) United States</p>	<p><i>Definition of employability:</i> “Psychosocial construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behavior, and affect, and enhance the individual-work interface” (p. 15).</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Perceiving employability as psychosocial.</p> <p><i>Emphasis:</i> The overlapping elements of employability: career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> The authors offer recommendations for managing employability in the workforce. In later research, Fugate and Kinicki (2008) developed the concept of “dispositional employability” to explain the importance of an individual’s proactive orientation to adaptability in the work domain.</p>
<p>McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) United Kingdom</p>	<p><i>Definition of interactive employability:</i> “Dynamic interaction of individual attributes, personal circumstances, labor market conditions and other ‘context’ factors” (p. 207).</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Holistic framework recognizing supply-side and demand-side factors with categories delineating individual factors, personal circumstances, and external factors.</p>



Authors	Framework
Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) Netherlands	<p><i>Emphasis:</i> Broad framework for government and policy analysis.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> Supporting analysts and policy makers in identifying the full range of factors affecting an individual's employment potential.</p> <p><i>Definition of employability:</i> "Continuous fulfilling, acquiring, or creating of work through the optimal use of one's competences" (p. 453).</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Objectivizing measure of employability by direct questioning of supervisors.</p> <p><i>Emphasis:</i> Ongoing development of occupational expertise to meet changing workforce demands.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> Developed a tool for measuring employability in the organizational setting.</p>
Pool and Sewell (2007) United Kingdom	<p><i>Definition:</i> "Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful" (p. 280).</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Identifying critical elements of graduate employability based on existing research.</p> <p><i>Emphasis:</i> Developing a straightforward, accessible, and practical model of graduate employability.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> CareerEdge (Career development learning; Experience (work and life); Degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills, Generic skills; and Emotional intelligence) recalls essential components of employability.</p>
Rothwell and Arnold (2007) United Kingdom	<p><i>Definition of employability:</i> "The ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires" (p. 25).</p> <p><i>Approach:</i> Developed a self-perceived employability scale based on surveys of human resource professionals.</p> <p><i>Emphasis:</i> People's beliefs about their work options.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> The scale can be applied to occupational groups, organizational consultancy, and individual career development.</p>

As reflected in the variety of approaches here, many have sought to pinpoint the elusive concept of employability in the contemporary workplace. Models that have dominated this discussion from an applied psychology (person-centered) perspective can be grouped according to their emphasis on competence (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), self-perception (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007), and disposition (Fugate &

Kinicki, 2008). Each line of thinking contributes to an understanding of graduate employability and sheds light on the current study of individuals and their capacity for employment in a rapidly changing world.

Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) chose a practical competence-based approach to explain individual competitiveness in the workplace. Driven by behavior, competence implies a level of skillful mastery. The authors capitalize on the popularity of competence priorities (see Rothwell & Wellins, 2004) to underscore the relationship between skill development and employability, a concept useful for individuals seeking to understand how they can reasonably manage professional learning to optimize marketability. From a training perspective, this approach demystifies employability by adapting it to language that is work-based and explicit.

Rothwell and Arnold (2007) took a different angle by conceptualizing self-perceived individual employability. They too strive to make the concept appealing to practitioners, in this case through development of a scale gauging employability self-perceptions, used first with human resource professionals in the U.K. Their “perceived employability” is defined as the “ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one’s qualification level” (Rothwell et al., 2008, p. 2). Rothwell and Arnold acknowledge the external dimensions of employability and opt to focus on self-report measures for organizational use.

Fugate and Kinicki’s (2008) dispositional approach embodies a model for integrating current and future adaptive behaviors. Fugate et al. (2004) understood employability as a psychosocial construct, layering personal and societal factors with an emphasis on the adaptive behaviors necessary to remain employable. This view highlights the importance of favorable dispositions to acquire and maintain employment. Employability is regarded as a “multidimensional constellation” and, within that complexity, individuals proactively adapt themselves for work success given development of the right traits. Fugate and Kinicki built upon their psychosocial model in subsequent research identifying five indicators of employable dispositions: openness to changes at work, work and career resilience, work and career proactivity, career motivation, and work identity. This trait-based approach is aimed to facilitate development of precursors for successful employment, paving the way for proactive interventions that enhance “employable” predispositions.

Each team of authors introduced here replaces the grand narrative of stable career maturity with a more flexible understanding of 21<sup>st</sup> century career trajectories.

The proliferation of models, particularly in the 2002-2007 timeframe, indicates increased interest in defining a construct previously considered fuzzy and improperly used (Philpott, 1999). With each contribution, “employability” shifts angles for deeper understanding and accessibility, a significant improvement because widened access to higher education prompts the need to explain “graduate employability” to an expanded demographic. Like the mnemonic “CareerEdge” developed by Pool and Sewell (2007), the present study aims to make the complex process of developing employability narratives helpful and transparent.

### **Related Themes of Self-Belief and Employability Management**

#### **Self-Belief**

Employability has its roots in the emergent and evolving self-beliefs that shape our future outcomes, though not all theorists include self-belief as a component in the employability construct. Central to this discussion is the concept of self-efficacy, defined by psychologist Albert Bandura (1985) as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). Efficacy pertains to an individual’s perception of his or her capacity and outcome expectations. It is recognized in Knight and Yorke’s (2002) employability model (the “E”) for contributing to the metacognitive awareness and confidence to self-manage career advancement. Efficacy directly affects the self-determination of career paths, creating the sense that any given career opportunity is or is not possible.

Self-efficacy development in higher education became a focus in Bandura’s later research and the concept reinforces similar messages in literature on career success. In Bandura’s (1997) words, “people who lack confidence in their judgment have difficulty making decisions and sticking with them even if they have been taught the strategies for doing so” (p. 427). The role of perseverance is crucial. In Heckman and Rubinstein’s (2001) longitudinal study of GED recipients, the biggest determinant of future success turned out to be persistence and other non-cognitive traits, like dependability, rather than the conventional assumption of IQ.

Interest in self-efficacy and other non-cognitive traits relates closely to Dweck’s research on motivation. Like Bandura (1997) and Heckman and Rubinstein (2001), Dweck (1999) champions individual potential and career mobility, interpreting ability as

an acquirable skill rather than a stable trait. She argues for addressing self-belief theories explicitly in education, an effort that enhances employability at an optimal time in development. Dweck's "malleable mindset" shifts focus from intelligence quotients to strategies that reframe thinking on student capability and motivation. She argues that students are more likely to succeed if they believe first, that they have the capability, and second, that their preparation for success is a worthy investment of personal time and effort.

College students face the challenge of negotiating their self-beliefs and circumstances in the transition from school to work. The social cognitive career theory proposed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), building upon Bandura's self-efficacy work (1985), explains the delicate art of self-management in terms of a person's interrelated self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals. The theory sheds light on personal career decision-making, determined and shaped by beliefs about self-capability and perceptions of what is realistic. Savickas's (2011) career construction theory adds that career themes become apparent in the stories individuals tell, each of which imposes meaning onto their vocational development. This constructivist approach represents new paradigmatic thinking in career psychology, with self-directed career adaptability replacing career maturity as the critical construct.

### **Employability Management**

Few have addressed the question of how employability is managed by college students, but Knight and Yorke (2002) proposed an integrative model for developing undergraduate employability, recognizing the issue to be economically imperative in the United Kingdom. They believe a university program of study is positioned to instill positive self-beliefs in students that strengthen workplace resilience. Maximizing the benefit requires a curricular integration of employability from program beginning to end. They recommend that professors provide ample formative feedback for the purpose of self-assessment and reflection, making growing career- and self-awareness a recurrent point of conversation. In her conceptual paper addressing the role of employability in higher education, Turner (2014) concurs, arguing for a greater focus on self-directed student learning, awareness, reflection, and understanding of the self's capacity to effect personal growth.

Actual work experience during the college years is assumed to play a strong mediating role between undergraduate learning and future employability. Many extol

the benefits of the college internship, citing its influence on job-related skills and attributes desired by employers (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). In their study of employers, Molseed, Alsup, and Voyles (2003) found that internships provided students with the problem-solving experiences critical for career success. Questions remain, however, regarding the feasibility of aspiration-related work experience for lower-income college students, many of whom barely get by negotiating coursework expectations with the part-time jobs taken to pay tuition (Allen et al., 2013). The pressure for ‘added-value’ experiences beyond coursework frames employability as a self-project needing continual initiative and maintenance to achieve the ‘well-rounded’ self.

Knight and Yorke (2002) argue that traditional higher education curriculum has focused on disciplinary-based understanding and skills, sometimes at the expense of efficacy beliefs and metacognition. All students benefit from strengthened self-beliefs, but some especially need help with realizing their academic, social, and personal growth. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) student integration theory posits that demographic factors such as high school performance and socioeconomic status partly explain a student’s successful integration of the academic and social aspects of college life. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a harder time integrating their social and academic selves for personal gain, struggling, in other words, with employability management that extends beyond disciplinary-based skill development.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1971) has led the research on social reproduction in education, arguing that unequal access to “cultural capital” affects employment outcomes. Cultural capital addresses power, encompassing the knowledge, skills, attributes, and experiences that give individuals higher status in society. Stich (2012) adopted Bourdieu’s theoretical framework on cultural capital to explain how the recent proliferation of honors colleges in universities across the U.S. reproduces a tracking system by disproportionately admitting White affluent students. Positional privilege recalls research by Stuber (2011) and Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) that cites evidence of what Stuber calls “the hidden injuries of class” in higher education systems. These researchers pose critical questions about inclusion in college student socialization and services, formal and informal, that affect graduate employability.

As students age into adulthood, they are expected to rebuild and rehearse their graduate identity to suit changing circumstances (Holmes, 2001), part of a process Ibarra (2004) refers to as “reinventing” in her book on working identity in adulthood. This flexible identity combined with the need to maintain sought-after skills brings to

mind the notion of the “flexpert” (Njoku, Van der Heijden, & Inanga, 2010), a person who is adaptable and in possession of expertise.

Complementing worker concern for employability is the employer focus on talent management, of great interest given competition for top graduates and the professional development of employees to acquire competence as needed (Nilsson & Ellstrom, 2012). In “The Mismanagement of Talent,” Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue for reframing talent management, with its elitist connotations, in favor of employability investment, an approach that recognizes breadth of skill given widening participation in higher education. This strategic investment in all incoming workers is explained as a systemic critique: “The focus on recruitment and talents of the few, rather than the training of the workforce as a whole, underplays the importance of work context and the contribution of all employees irrespective of their position in the corporate pecking order” (p. 190). Further research also emphasizes professional learning and development of all system employees. Benson (2006) and Sieben (2007) found that participation in training increased workers’ organizational commitment, and De Cuyper and De Witte (2011) suggested that congruence between employee and organizational values positively affected performance, investment, and career outcomes. These findings support the present focus on employability narrative development in the likelihood of job restructuring and skill renewal throughout one’s career.

## **Conclusion**

An extensive review of the literature suggests a likely interplay between self-belief and environmental factors in the narrative construction at the center of this research. Literature is rife with reference to “a good fit” in both college and the workplace, suggesting a subjective, nuanced balance of variables. The dynamic of “interactive employability” (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) also appeared frequently in the literature, clarifying an overarching theme that informs labor market policy with an expansive set of interacting variables. Employability models may emphasize different aspects of this self-and-environment interaction, but they all seek to convey the underlying complexity. In the following grounded theory research, employability is examined as an individualized construct in a university setting with great interest in how students make sense of it.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

*“We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed”* (Brooks, 1992, p. 3).

### Introduction

This chapter explains the methodological rationale, research context, and data processes underpinning the present study. A qualitative research approach was chosen to explore how students perceive and construct their employability narratives with close attention to the sense-making process. Under the broad umbrella of qualitative research, grounded theory methodology best fit the study of this explorative construct.

Founders Glaser and Strauss (1967) envisioned grounded theory as an investigative process of sampling, analyzing, and data comparison to bridge theory and empirical research, but the two authors ultimately disagreed about the precise methodology and discontinued their collaboration. Strauss joined Corbin in a successful long-term collaboration (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that clarified the process of data analysis for grounded theory, an approach criticized by Glaser as too prescribed according to Creswell (2013). Corbin and Strauss, offering more structure and, in response to Glaser, claiming to guide rather than prescribe, were chosen as the primary reference in this study, but the philosophical premise of the founders remains relevant.

Creswell (2013) contends that the founders' premise grounds theory in the actions and interactions of the people being studied. With this primary focus in mind, grounded theory operates according to the constant comparative method in which examination of data elements, such as categories and properties, are continuously compared in the production of a unified theoretical explanation, a process explained by Corbin and Strauss (2008). In this study, the theoretical explanation identifies the process of employability narrative development for students in liberal arts majors.

According to Creswell (2014), blending data in a convergent research design can strengthen understanding of new phenomena, compensating in part for the limitations of one method used alone. Interviews provide rich narrative portrayal of individuals, resulting in insights that can be enhanced or modified by data from survey responses or field observation. Like a camera lens zooming in and out to ascertain the best field of vision, it is important for the dynamic construct of employability to be viewed first-hand, second-hand, in-depth, and in the broader context of empirical research. Grounded

theory is well suited to this lens variation because it favors a rigorous pursuit of all relevant data without the restrictions of a scientific experiment. Countering the conventional wisdom of their time, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued against valuing the preconceptions that come with a priori knowledge, operating according to the assumption that this bias interferes with the grounded theory process. This philosophical approach to research supports the position and perspective of the author, a doctoral student seeking to actively listen and mutually construct meaning in shared experience with participants.

In this chapter, an explanation of the interview protocol and procedures is introduced along with a description of the research setting. The section following it details the process of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data to create a theoretical outline. The overall plan follows recommendations of grounded theorists Corbin and Strauss (2008). In keeping with their basic principles, the entire inquiry acknowledges the merit of unanticipated findings, strands of research that unfold in the discovery of new themes. This receptivity represents opportunities for further depth in a process that continually examines and reframes content to address main research questions.

### **Pilot Studies**

Initially, a pilot project was conducted using semi-structured interviews and a grounded-theory approach (see Appendix B for pilot interview protocol) at the same university. Pilot participants were on-campus industry recruiters with direct experience interviewing and training young adults. This pilot was a joint project between the author and the director of career services for a college of business, now a faculty member in engineering. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by both researchers. This analytic process sensitized the author to relevant practitioner perspectives outside academia and gave her practice facilitating interview discussion in ways that do not inadvertently lead participants toward a foregone conclusion. A second pilot study tested the interview protocol and surveys with the elicited participation of two recent CLA graduates (female, Caucasian), both of whom expressed support for the study and said the questions were reasonable and appropriate for their population of peers.



## Participants

From 2015 to 2016, participants were recruited from the main campus of The Pennsylvania State University (PSU), a large, public state-related research university with a diverse student demographic. PSU ranks in the top 10 of Pennsylvania colleges that provide the best return on investment for alumni (Best Value Colleges in Pennsylvania, 2015). Demographic differences exist here in student retention, however, a critical measure of who succeeds at an institution. According to a PSU website, third-year retention rates indicate that a little more than half (56.9%) of African Americans are retained compared to about three quarters (77.8%) of White students (Facts about Students, 2015). This information is notable in the author's attempt to fairly represent non-White students, especially African Americans.

Information collected on demographic characteristics, however, was necessarily minimal. According to Glaser (1978), classic grounded theory is a process intended to only collect information relevant to the production of theory. With that in mind, the researcher let socio-economic variables emerge naturally in the spoken language of participants rather than asking questions that may inadvertently impose categories and interrupt the narrative flow. The exception here is that some questions were asked during the digital intake process of recruitment. Interested participants completed a short web-based form that asked for major(s), academic year, name, and contact information.

Participants were selected according to their year of matriculation status (seniors and juniors only) and enrollment in the university's College of Liberal Arts (CLA). Unemployment is higher for graduates with non-technical majors and the 9.4 percent national unemployment rate of Humanities and Liberal Arts college graduates motivates concern for and concentration on students in these majors (Carnevale et al., 2012). The rationale for the target age is that upperclassmen have the most experience to draw from in explaining how their college experience contributes to an emerging narrative of employability. Juniors and especially seniors are expected to be thinking about their graduate employability, so the interview questions were relevant in a time of personal development and occupational change. This target pool of students had, by college regulations, successfully persisted in the CLA with a minimum grade point average of 2.0 and enrolled in one of the many majors offered by the college. CLA majors range from classic disciplines, like English or History, to more unusual studies, like Criminology or Jewish Studies.

Several measures were taken to recruit as many eligible students as possible for study participation:

1. The author provided informational recruitment cards and digital recruitment messages to the director of the Career Enrichment Network for the CLA, digital recruitment messages to the CLA director of academic advising, and digital recruitment messages to the assistant director of the university's Career Services to promote the study to interested students.
2. The author attended and recruited in-person at three CLA events organized by the Career Enrichment Network.
3. The author presented the study to the Undergraduate Council for the Liberal Arts for students to recruit one another.

After the initial group of students was recruited to participate, the author relied on a continual partnership based on mutual referrals with the Career Enrichment Network and “snowball sampling,” a method of recruitment whereby participants recommend study participation to one another (Patton, 2002).

To incentivize study participation, the author offered a structured opportunity to review any career-related document belonging to the participant, drawing from her expertise in career development facilitation. This measure added an element of “action-oriented research” (Kegan, 1994), meaning study participation intended to actively benefit participants. For many, the concept of employability seemed to crystalize in their minds as they deeply considered it, often for the first time, through interaction, consultation, and feedback.

## **Data Collection**

### **Interviews**

A primary goal in this study was to collect rich narrative data useful for the construction of theory. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “thick” description is more trustworthy and transferable. To achieve this depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were scheduled for the duration of one hour in the author's on-campus office. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) began with a “grand-tour question” (Leech, 2002) to get participants speaking comfortably, in the direction of their choice, about the main subject of the research: “What do you think of when you hear the term ‘employability’?” The remaining questions focused on first-person narratives related to

employability, constructed to elicit answers without presupposing critical influences, such as the role of coursework, professors, or academic advising. Minor adaptations were made throughout the study to zero in on recurring themes described with importance by participants. For example, the influence of “Honors College,” “identity as a first-generation college student,” and “study abroad” emerged early, introduced by participants and then addressed in subsequent interviews to refine and augment the prevailing conceptual categories.

Unstructured follow-up questions and prompts, such as “help me understand...,” delved more deeply into participants’ perceptions and train of thought. Although the author did not insert much of herself in order to keep the focus on participants, she engaged them in a relaxed and friendly manner, becoming “conversational partners” as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012). Immersed in conversation, the author and participant become co-constructors and interpreters of knowledge (James & Busher, 2009). This natural flow of conversation helped elicit genuine concerns of students as they reflected on the concept of employability and applied it to themselves.

To address ethical and logistical concerns related to the interview process, participants were asked for permission to record the conversation at the beginning of the interview and a verbal script explained the confidentiality and privacy maintained throughout the research process. Participants were told the author was conducting doctoral research on their perceptions, stories, and experiences regarding employability with expressed interest in their reflective identity as a student majoring within liberal arts. They were encouraged to respond candidly without the pressure of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Since some students seemed concerned that they did not properly understand the definition of employability, this last point was increasingly emphasized.

Within one week of interview completion, recordings were transferred to a secure private computer. Transcriptions of the recordings were conducted manually and the author assigned a pseudonym to each. In an explicit commitment to participant privacy, she further omitted all personally identifying details. Once transcriptions were complete, participants were privately given the opportunity to review their own transcripts, a practice in qualitative research known as the member check-in (Creswell, 2014).

## **Surveys: The Dispositional Measure of Employability (DME) and the Self-Perceived Employability Scale**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, at the conclusion of each interview, participants were given the DME (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008) to measure their dispositional approach to employability (Appendix D) and the self-perceived employability scale (Rothwell et al., 2008) to measure self-understanding of employability (Appendix E). Both surveys were slightly adapted for readability and appropriateness. The DME was intended for mid-career professionals, so language was adapted to suit the college student demographic. The self-perceived employability scale required only minor adaptation to improve readability. These short assessments provided another vantage point from which to interpret student construction of employability.

### **Field Observation**

To better understand the emic knowledge and interpretations of the target population, the author observed programs designed for undergraduate juniors and seniors in liberal arts majors during a week set aside for special career events hosted by the university's CLA Career Enrichment Network. Observations were documented in field notes, then included in the analysis of supplemental findings. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) advise that: "in writing field notes, the field researcher should give special attention to the indigenous meanings and concerns of the people studied" (p. 11). In keeping with this advice, the author paid attention to first-person verbal and nonverbal cues indicating responses to the career information presented.

### **Data Analysis**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) outlined a coding process for grounded theory studies that guided data analysis. This process began with open coding as the author reviewed each transcript, wrote analytic memos, and identified preliminary conceptual themes as codes, remaining open to countless theoretical directions. In this early phase of research, the author examined answers to open-ended questions to identify patterns in the student conceptualization of employability, attending to emergent themes line by line in every transcript. Codes used action words or phrases in an attempt to achieve cogency and fidelity to participant language and intent. Whenever possible, exact participant wording was used. Gradually, a codebook was developed to track, organize, and

maintain relevant themes. Meanwhile, memos captured analytic insights to extrapolate on the brevity of codes, providing a record of reflection contributing to higher levels of abstraction and evolving theory.

Throughout data analysis, the author increasingly engaged in axial coding to identify new codes and relationships between them, focusing on interesting new categories that seemed to “nest” within broader ones. After the coding of each transcript, analysis made incrementally more sense of emerging theory with comparison of codes, memos, and the revisiting of relevant literature. Selective coding occurred in the final stage to focus on understanding categories and sub-categories near saturation. Dedoose, a secure web-based mixed methods research tool, was used to code, write memos, and manage the organization of data throughout the study.

The analyzing process continued until few new core themes or properties of existing ones emerged in coding interview transcripts. Theoretical sorting of codes, memos, and code properties challenged the author to synthesize an extensive codebook for an integrated theoretical framework that could clearly and substantively explain employability narratives and aspects therein from the perspective of an undergraduate in liberal arts. Emerging themes in this framework hold promise for further study, but complete theoretical saturation did not occur due to the remarkable diversity of participants in the targeted demographic.

A prescient need during analysis was: what are the themes in a student’s construction of an employability narrative and what determines them? Barley (1983) explains that themes “imply a ‘message’ or interpretation that runs through numerous activities and events and thus act as the cultural glue for attributing coherence and consistency to myriad separate actions, events, and objects” (p. 399). This understanding of theme resonates with the construction of coherent employability narratives, created through an integrated understanding of career-related action, events, and reflective practice. Emerging themes are expected to result in not just an explanation of what is happening, but theoretical categories that capture the employability narrative in formation.

Survey responses and field observations were collected and analyzed for the purpose of assessing and reflecting upon individual employability dispositions, self-identified employability measures, and contextual factors. Descriptive statistics of all quantitative data are made available and compared with interview themes in the report of supplemental findings in Chapter 5.

## **Validity and Trustworthiness**

Results, analysis, and discussion in this study are only useful to the extent that every sequence of activity exhibits validity and trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness guided data collection and analysis to establish validity. They posit that trustworthiness includes: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

First, though, it is acknowledged that in an attempt to achieve in-depth description from study participants, this research focused on quality of data extracted with no pretense of gathering the quantity of data necessary for generalization. As an explorative study, the aim was to pose timely, relevant questions rather than anticipate fixed certainties. The lack of generalizability and conclusive outcomes does limit the scope of transferability. The intent was to generate a baseline of knowledge on graduate employability narratives as a framework for future research and discussion.

A significant hurdle in conducting research with voluntary participants is recruiting a representative sample within the chosen demographic. Undergraduates are understandably busy during the final years of college. Within the CLA, it is challenging to recruit and retain study participants that reflect differences in variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and college major. To partially compensate for this limitation, the author depended on her professional network for student recruitment, requesting help as needed to identify students in a category needing greater representation.

### **Credibility**

Several techniques were utilized to ensure the credibility of findings. First, the author established a good rapport with study participants, encouraging them to pose their own questions and see the study as an opportunity for practice with interviewing and professional development. She personalized her interactions with students, sharing briefly her own background and position and encouraging them to follow up with her for any referrals helpful to the upcoming transition to work.

Second, the author engaged in "member check-ins" as mentioned previously, sending each participant a transcript of the interview to review for its representation of words and perspective. This member check-in progressed into a dialogic interpretation of major themes to the extent the participant wished to engage in that process.

The author periodically immersed herself in the undergraduate culture experienced by her participants. She attended college and career events targeted at this student population. Typically, she was a nonparticipant observer to focus on a descriptive understanding of individuals in their natural setting.

The completion of a pilot study added further credibility. Although pilot participants were clearly a different demographic, their subject matter expertise in extensive interviews helped the author learn how to carefully frame questions about employability perceptions. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define triangulation as the “simultaneous display of multiple, refracted realities” (p. 8). This definition reflects the multiple phases and methodology of the author’s study. Shared understandings of employability narratives form concurrently in different contexts, from natural observation to interviews with a diverse population.

### **Transferability**

Interviews were led for the purpose of achieving rich, thick description, a process strengthened by the credibility techniques described above. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that rich qualitative data is necessary for transferability because it allows others to understand and appreciate the data source. Additionally, the author sought observational data beyond interviews in her campus-event observations focusing on the experiences of CLA undergraduates. For findings to be deemed useful, it was important for the author to be transparent about the inevitable limitations of this research and strive to uncover the tacit knowledge that may be overlooked by other methods.

### **Dependability**

The author consulted with individuals trained in qualitative data analysis external to the study to examine the process and product of the research, including an individual consultation with Dr. John W. Creswell, a leading mixed methods researcher at the University of Michigan. Prior to data collection, students representing the target demographic reviewed and gave feedback on the relevance and clarity of all questions asked. During data collection and analysis, a graduate student trained in qualitative methodology was asked to independently code sample transcripts. Although the codes were well elaborated at this point, the external consultation offered a fresh perspective to guide clarification of the emerging model.

The author committed to reflexivity throughout the study, recognizing that the nuanced process of grounded theory requires thoughtful transparency on the part of the researcher. To her, this meant being open about research perspectives and procedures, including the inevitable partiality she brought to her role. Personal beliefs and experiences shape her interpretations. On that note, brief autobiographical information may be informative. The author is a 39-year-old Caucasian woman, originally from the Midwestern United States, currently balancing life and work roles as a student, educator, parent, and member of the community. She is culturally and geographically situated close to participants, but almost 20 years older. This background shapes her perspective, demeanor, and language in interactions with participants. She is accustomed to asking students questions in a semi-advising capacity, hoping to empower them to be more self-directed learners. She was cognizant, in the research capacity, to avoid leading as an educator guides students, instead framing questions to allow participants free exploration of issues, concerns, and experiences true to them.

### **Ethics**

Prior to the commencement of active research, a study proposal was submitted, along with all relevant documentation, to the Institutional Review Board at the university supporting this scholarship. The approved submission detailed the ethical protocol for individual consent, privacy, and full disclosure for the benefit and consideration of all participating human subjects.

### **Assumptions**

“To be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure,” (Hawkins, 1999). Hawkins’ statement points to a prevalent assumption in employability research: that being employable must add a measure of value to the individual, in this case, security. It implies a difference in valuation between “employed” and “employable,” counters the assumption that a positive status of employment is sufficient, and suggests that employability can be understood. These assumptions can all be subjected to vigorous debate. For the purpose of this study and reflexive dialogue, it is important to be clear that the author shares all of these assumptions, operating according to the mindset that “employability” is a valuable construct worth further inquiry.



## CHAPTER 4: INTERVIEW FINDINGS

*“We are not one self but many selves. It is nearly impossible to think out how to reinvent ourselves, and therefore, it is equally hard to execute in a planned and orderly way” (Ibarra, 2004, p. 2).*

### Introduction

This chapter presents thematic findings from a narrative analysis of rising graduates’ aspirational discourses within the College of Liberal Arts. It begins with a demographic overview of participants followed by analysis of employability self-constructions and, through verbatim excerpts, interpretation of how employability narratives are understood and managed amid driving and constraining forces. Continuing along a similar theme, the chapter then explores how participants understood and reflected on the liberal arts identifier in relation to their marketability. Significant discussion is devoted to this topic because it emerged as a problematic and compelling theme. Of relevance to the earlier discussion on widening participation in higher education, concerns of participants representing working class and minority groups are also reported. Finally, findings are presented on integral themes, values, and what success means to a liberal arts student. A conclusion summarizes participants’ employability narratives to elucidate theory from the rich practice of dialogue.

The nuanced articulation of self-employability in this chapter resembles Ibarra’s qualitative study (2004) using similar interview techniques to generate theory on adult working identities in transition. Although university students are in the earliest stage of career transition in adulthood, Ibarra’s approach to constructive narratives informs our understanding of students nearing completion of liberal arts degree programs. All participants in this study underwent some transformation in becoming their present selves, demonstrating engagement with the idea of employability in the process. Their readiness for career reflection is explained well by this passage:

Certainly, reflecting on past experiences, future dreams, and current values or strengths is an essential and valuable step. But reflection best comes later, when we have some momentum and when there is something new to reflect on. Our old identities, even when they are out of whack with our core values and fundamental preferences, remain entrenched because they are anchored in our daily activities, strong relationships, and life stories. In the same way, identities change in practice, as we start doing new things (crafting experiments),

interacting with different people (shifting connections), and reinterpreting our life stories through the lens of the emerging possibilities (making sense) (p. 16). These words anticipate interview findings with emphasis on dialogic learning concentrated in the final years of college.

### Demographic Overview of Participants

In total, 32 interviews were conducted, coded, and analyzed. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants while still humanizing their excerpts. Of the 32 participants, 12 identified as first-generation college students.

Table 2

*Participants by Undergraduate Year, Gender, and Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity*

	Juniors		Seniors	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Race/ethnicity				
White/Caucasian	Cassie, Brianna, Kathryn	Tom, Caleb, Byron, David	Kara, Stephanie, Emma, Jessa, Ellen, Sylvia, Bethany, Caitlin, Maggie, Erica	Jared
Black/African-American			Tiffany	Roderick, Jahari
Chinese	Jiayi, Lian			
Hispanic/Latino	Nelia, Katia	Lucero		Angelo
Filipino-American			Karilyn	
Indian-American	Monika			
Multi-racial: Asian/Italian-American, Egyptian/Puerto-Rican-American, African-American/Puerto-Rican		Ryan	Farah, Chantelle	

Participants represented a variety of liberal arts majors: Psychology, Philosophy, Labor and Employment Relations, Spanish, History, Economics, Political Science, English, Criminology, Anthropology, Sociology, French, and Asian Studies. Several had double majors, within and outside the College of Liberal Arts. Many of the participants also had unique minors or areas of emphasis.

All individuals participated voluntarily, mostly in exchange for a consultation on their résumé, cover letter, application, or LinkedIn profile. For a few of the participants, they asked for nothing in return, participating because the study had been recommended. Throughout the interview process, comprised of the interview followed by help, referrals, and later the member check-in, the author got to know each participant reasonably well. The following thematic descriptions attempt to preserve the richness of individual voices through extensive excerpting of interview dialogue.

### **Student Perceptions of Employability**

#### **Research Question 1A: “How do they [students] perceive employability?”**

All interviews began with the question, “What do you think of when you hear the term employability?” followed by responsive prompts. This question aimed to bring out sense-making perceptions of the overarching construct before further conversation could influence the candid reaction.

Prevalent responses mentioned “skills” or “skill set” along with the absolutist expectation that a qualifier or set of standards existed according to which candidates either succeeded or fell short. Ryan described this as:

*When I hear the term employability, it's the certain set of skills that a student offers to a potential employer and what those skill sets are that would make the employer want to seek them.*

A few stated that these skills (e.g., language translation, software proficiency) were developed in coursework but it was more common to discursively embed “employable skills” in talk of paid employment, whether or not it related to their aspirations. Answers centered on the anticipation of immediate employment, with skills and attributes from recent work experience the first to come mind. Psychology and political science majors, as an exception, were more likely to connect the precursors to employability with

theoretical coursework, expressing how their perceived emotional intelligence grew from a course-enhanced understanding of individuals and society.

For many, the notion of employability, understood to imply *graduate* employability, provoked anxiety and that association shaped the tone for several interviews. “Stress” and “feeling overwhelmed” were common themes, especially in the context of peer comparison and expectations of steep competition for jobs considered more elite and professional. This statement by Brianna reflects that insecurity:

*I realized that graduation is coming up and I need to have a plan and everyone else has a plan and I don't really.*

Heightened insecurity also surfaced at the beginning of an interview with an international student who conceived of employability in terms of “percentage” and “chance,” cognizant of a congested elite labor market in her country of origin:

*Jiayi: I think the purpose people are pursuing higher education is because they want better employability to get better jobs. Also like in China, it's not possible to get a better job if you are not master degree. For in my country, especially in my city, everyone needs to be a master degree to get more high competition in the employment.*

Reactions to “employability” also led to an expression of pragmatic need for career-related action, implying that to become employable meant ‘getting real.’ Here Sylvia expresses concern about her classmates and some urgency:

*Freshmen year and sophomore year it's like, 'Oh, I have all the time in the world.' But the junior year, it comes at you very quickly, like, and you hear other people talking, 'Well, I have this internship and that internship and I have this job set up' and you're sitting there like, 'Oh, I'm behind and I need to figure this out very quickly or I'm not going to get a job.' And I think that's something that a lot of liberal arts majors worry about. From the moment you tell somebody you're going to be an anthropologist, they look at you in a sympathetic way and say, 'Well, I hope you get a job.'*

In further conversation, many participants noted additional criteria for what constituted characteristics of the employable. GPA occurred frequently, as did marketing materials associated with a job search, especially the résumé but also cover letters, personal statements, and transcripts. Beyond these surface-level expressions of individual merit, participants discursively shifted to emphasize dispositional traits and attributes, going to some length in discussion here. They noted the importance of

extroversion, likeability, attitude, work ethic, confidence, approachability, optimism, communication, time management, leadership, and fit. Emma's conception of employability addressed this last point:

*I think of the ability of the employers to get a sense of who you are and how you fit ideas for their company and that they mesh together.*

Participant conceptions of employability were also notable for what they were missing. Few mentioned anything about the labor market, indicating their constructivist take on employability drew exclusively from the supply side. They spoke at length about individual strengths and weaknesses, implicitly conveyed to shape probability of employment, but they spoke little of contextual considerations, such as economic policy and market-driven needs. Discussion that turned to individual uncertainties stopped short of characterizing risks inherent in a rapidly changing economy. An exception to this was Kathryn alluding to the interplay of skills and market demand:

*When I hear the term employability, usually I think of, you know, the job market and how the job market's, you know, going to impact me, what skills do I need to be employed in a specific career or a specific field.*

Kathryn relates her development of skills directly to employment here, the classic human capital assumption that a college investment begets economic returns, but she did not elaborate further. As subsequent sections suggest, she and her peers struggled to articulate skills tailored to labor market needs. The language of high-priority occupations was absent from the discussion.

### **Managing the Employability Narrative**

**Research Question 1B: “How do they [students] manage their employability narrative?”**

**Research Question 2: “What university-based influences do students identify as contributing to their employability?”**

In storied accounts, participants shared factors affecting employability development throughout their university years. Socialization beyond the classroom, structured and unstructured, through work experience or less formal clubs and organizations, emerged as the defining schema of career management. Their fragmented

sequence of events, just beginning to come together, led the narrative through stories of volunteer work, summer jobs, study abroad, and daily conversation making sense of where they stood in relation to where they needed or wanted to be. The university affected many of these perceived experiences, primarily for its influence on habitus and socialization.

Chantelle characterized the necessary maintenance of employability as a constant “push” and “pull,” for she felt both inspired and vulnerable as a mixed-race first-generation college student working to develop a marketable career identity, trying her best to work within a system that she did not feel always worked for her. Although students were not asked specifically about challenges, the process of negotiating conflict and overcoming struggle dominated many of their narratives, especially those who self-identified as first-generation college students or racial minorities, a topic meriting its own section later in this chapter. The following stories capture narratives in formation as participants recalled positive and negative influences shaping their growing preparation for work. One of the initial research questions aimed at identifying university-based influences never fully materialized, as students tended to speak more of the impact of extracurricular and work experiences as well as familial influences.

## **Driving Forces**

**Research Question 2B: “How does work experience contribute to employability development?”**

**Research Question 2C: “How does extracurricular involvement contribute to employability development?”**

The most prevalent positive influences driving the narrative occurred in the form of extracurricular involvement, but also through internships and, less commonly, study abroad. For students who successfully applied to the Honors College, this involvement exposed them to employability-enhancing opportunities by expanding networks and offering identifiable prestige, perks they understood and seemed ready to leverage to their advantage.

**Extracurricular involvement.** Whether the topic was stories they would share in an interview or more general career reflection on employability, participants repeatedly turned to their extracurricular involvement as critical value added to their employability narrative. In this context, extracurricular refers broadly to the unpaid

organized activities in which students participated. Two senior Economics majors (both male) offered similar descriptions of employability, both centered beyond coursework:

*Tom: ...more than just textbook knowledge, I think the communication and, like, professionalism and those skills you gain from being active within organizations on campus.*

*Jared: It's what you have done outside of the classroom that really makes you a well-rounded individual, what makes you succeed in the workplace.*

Other participants acknowledged the role of the extracurricular in easing their transition into the labor market. Roderick reported that he had not been very involved on campus until he participated one summer in a leadership institute, an experience that helped him identify transferable skills in a group setting:

*We really worked on developing our critical thinking, our teamwork, like working on a vision individualizing ourselves and finding out ways we can foster growth and grow some ourselves... It really helped me to realize where I was at and how I could get to where I want to go.*

A frequent talking point was volunteerism, a practice that may be more common at this university, which hosts “Thon,” a dance marathon to benefit pediatric cancer patients and the largest student-run philanthropy in the world. Participants, particularly women, spoke of Thon’s transformative influence when asked what stories they were likely to tell future employers:

*Cassie: I'm really involved in Thon. I've always used that to help me with people skills and getting along with people. Having to work together for, like, a common cause. I have, like, a leadership role in my committee right now. We get everyone together, bring them closer together, and I'm the one who has to be the one who plans, like, 'Let's do this together, guys. Does anyone want to go bowling?'*

*Brianna: It was really awesome to just be involved with something that's bigger than myself.*

Civic involvement appeared to play a strong role not just in developing skills, but in clarifying an aspirational working identity. To the extent they took a strong position on their marketability, it often emerged when placing labor market value on personal experience with service:

Farah: *Future-wise, I realize I really enjoy volunteer work and working with people, so I think those skills will help me.*

David: *I've always been, like, I guess, compassionate if you want to say that. But like, really trying to help people. That whole fear of death really sparked my interest in that and made me realize that I want to do that. It's tough. I want to balance being established with myself and then try to do everything else for everyone else.*

Kara: *Thinking back to high school and middle school, I've always been involved in different clubs where we do, like, community service activities and things like that. And I made a lot of really good and genuine friendships through those types of organizations, just kind of sharing a common bond with people. We want to do whatever we can to help. So even when I came to college... I mean I've done different volunteer opportunities and things like that and I just think it's really good, the whole helping idea. It's so easy to interact with people and everyone is just so nice and it kind of sounds dumb, but I really like the interactions I have and feeling you're actually doing something to make a difference. I just value that type of interaction with people more than just not-very-personal types of communication.*

Students with fewer work experiences tended to emphasize their civic involvement in response to questions, anticipating the need to define themselves as a “leader” among peers in spite of limited professional experience.

**The internship.** Like extracurricular involvement, work experience but more precisely “the internship” prevailed as a dominant, recurrent narrative theme. Internship was coded so frequently that it became its own core category, sought after as the pinnacle of college work experience that would directly benefit future opportunities.

For David, a first-generation college student who had transferred to the university, the internship had become an elusive barrier to achieving his standard of professionalism and graduate employability:

*Yeah, I've always known that I needed to get an internship my junior year but I figured, you know, I'm an intelligent person. I'm going to get one. Kind of arrogant, really, before I realized that it's hard. I have all these great qualities and my résumé, cover letter are great. I just had everything perfect and I thought I was, like, the perfect candidate and I thought I was just going to apply for one and get it. That was completely wrong.*

For Brianna and Jared, also first-generation college students, acquiring an internship had become a focal point driving the narrative:

*Brianna: I also have questions such as who I want to talk to to reach a point where I can be employable, and what I wanna do for my internship, if I even*



*have an internship. I haven't gotten to that point where I need to, like, get one yet, but I know a lot of my friends have and I need to work on that, because I feel, like, left out and behind in everything, and everyone else has an internship and I don't. So I am really looking forward to meeting with people about that and learning more about what I can do to have that opportunity and be more employable.*

*Jared: And I think maybe junior year is sort of when you really kind of hit that panic state – I need an internship. You know, if I don't get one, am I going to get a job senior year?*

For those who did acquire and persist with an internship, the experience deepened a sense of passion as they explored professional interests. Internship learning became a catalyst for self-realization and career momentum:

*Kathryn: Well, I'm trying to bridge my political science major with biology and French minors. But yeah, it's kind of difficult to get all three of them in the same boat. But I actually have an internship with [redacted] and we're doing it.*

*Monika: I actually really just was interested in the biology of the brain that led perfectly to wanting to be part of the neuroscience concentration and I had an internship last summer that just sealed it.*

The internship was also viewed as a rite of passage for fostering the graduate employability needed to enter an occupational field, bridging student and professional selves:

*Caitlin: So I think an aha moment that I had was like when I got an internship and I thought to myself that oh, if I can have this internship, then it can lead me other places.*

*Cassie: Well, I think internship is more in the field you want to go. I know that for work experience I was a waitress, but that was kind of to make money and not really, I don't want to have like a career in waitressing. But I think an internship really opens doors to other opportunities in terms of, like, what you want to do with your life.*

*Brianna: Lately, I've tried to think about internships and that's the key that, I think, is going to, like, push me forward into my career.*

Participants further reinforced the idea of the internship as a socializing gateway toward professional employment. Students who had completed internships often remarked on organizational culture and social learning. For example:

Tom: *I think having the internship experience to develop those like communication and professionalism skills and an understanding of the company's culture is huge.*

Byron summarized his internship experience for the instrumental role it played in networking:

*I can get in on the inside.*

This kind of remark about being “on the inside” emerged often as participants spoke of the clubs, associations, and work experiences allowing them an “in” with potential employers. In another instance, Byron remarked on a mentor who had “never filled out a job application,” a telling experience because the mentor had explained how new opportunities came through based on conversation with the right people rather than the traditional avenue of paperwork. Participant commentary along these lines reflected an acute awareness of the need to socialize oneself into aspirational work positions.

**The Honors College.** The Honors College at this university offers exclusive opportunities for members of its community. Eight participants who had successfully applied praised this program’s influence on their emergent employability with specific reference to exclusive networks, honors coursework, career services personnel, and sources of funding.

A valued institutional network, the Honors College holds a longstanding reputation signaling prestige and encouraging high-achieving members to capitalize on that status. This excerpt demonstrates confident participant awareness of the advantage:

Stephanie: *I know particularly that we have good opportunities in networking. We have a great career counselor and she... I should actually go see her again... she's just for us students and she is very wonderful at connecting people.*

The Honors College was particularly helpful for those pursuing graduate school due to the requirement that students write an undergraduate thesis. Here Stephanie differentiates between “employable” and “enrollable,” making the point that developing professionalism looks different depending on whether the focus is further school or employment:

*I think everyone would say, yeah, this is good for me, especially if they want to go on to graduate school. The fact that I've already done an undergraduate*

*thesis, like, makes me maybe not more employable, but more enrollable in that sense... It [referring to the Honors College] kind of does push you to do things that you wouldn't otherwise.*

Several Honors scholars also described how they would use honors coursework as a selling point in a pitch to employers, name-dropping the “Honors” reference to weave its influence into the discussion. Here Maggie emphasizes the transferability of critical thinking:

*I probably would use Schreyer [the Honors College] to say basically I did do challenging coursework... In an interview, if I was talking about, like, analytical skills and critical thinking and things like that, I would say one thing that really augmented those experiences for me in the classroom was the fact that it was honors coursework.*

In a different kind of testimonial, when asked what contributed most to her employability, Ellen responded that the Honors College was most influential. Explaining this further, she appeared to question whether it made her a better candidate, but seemed sure of the positive identification successfully branding her in the job market:

*I think getting into the Honors College really helped even if it didn't actually-- there's no reason why an honors student might be a better candidate than any other person, but it just looks good. Like I was applying to jobs as a nanny for a gap year and that's how I started off, 'I'm graduating from the Honors College.' And that, you know, people saw that and it made them more likely to hire me. I've been told by professors to write that even if it's completely irrelevant. People just really like to see the Honors College. It's like, well, OK, I took the courses. I might as well.*

A less cynical perspective on the Honors College, but one equally confident of its positive influence on employability came from Byron. Upon seeking out the career counselor for the Honors College, he successfully networked, secured internships, and established mentors in the occupational field to which he aspired. Byron characterized his Honors College participation as integral to the labor market advantage he gained through networking, a theme woven throughout his interview. Toward the end, he stated:

*As a Schreyer Honors student, you surround yourself with successful people.*

**Study abroad.** All nine participants who studied abroad cited this experience as a leading theme. Their characterizations point to a transformational benefit of time in

another country and they seemed to be working through how to articulate this as a selling point in the job search. The quantity of dialogue devoted to study abroad in interviews suggests that participants privileged to travel naturally gravitate toward discussing it.

*Cassie: I studied abroad last fall which is a huge, huge deal, so even that has helped me to generally see myself differently, see the world differently.*

Cassie went on to explain that her study abroad would be a marketable asset in a job interview, specifically because of the self-reliant learning developed through living alone in another country:

*So I did that by myself and then just the things that you learn abroad by traveling and figuring out real-world situations. That's kind of on your own. No one else is there to tell you what to do and just actually wanting to go see different things, like I went to a lot of museums there and I never would have thought I would do that. But I think just realizing that there's so much more to life than the United States of America. There's just so much more in the world. So many different cultures and religions that I think is eye-opening, so that would be beneficial in an employment situation.*

Stephanie spoke of her study abroad experience using similar language of resilience, also indicating she would likely relay her experience to potential employers:

*I saw what it would be like to be a Spanish student but it definitely had its additional challenges. But I think that's something I could speak to. And like, I like new challenges and I think that would develop kind of resilience and different skills that would lend more employability.*

Jared, having said his internship contributed most to employability, described study abroad as “a close second”:

*And then study abroad, I think, kind of shows you're an independent person. You're willing to go outside of your comfort zone. I was in Spain so it helped me to fine-tune some language skills. So I'm a Spanish major in addition to Economics, so aside from contributing to credits toward graduation requirements, it was really a great opportunity to live in another culture. And really experiencing another culture, I think, opens your eyes to dealing with a variety of people... It's a lifelong skill for sure.*

Maggie shared a similar perspective about study abroad with more description of the transferrable skill set. She tended to mention “tolerance for ambiguity” a lot, contextualized in the calm, critical lens that would serve her well in workplace dilemmas. Here she summarizes the benefits of study abroad:

*My study abroad experience was incredibly valuable in terms of the way in which I learned how to communicate with others in a very wide variety of situations. It really helped me become a more critical thinker... It's something where I really embraced the challenge of being in the unknown and that's something I handle well. I'm able to solve those problems when I don't have a lot of information around me and then problem solving more in general. I'm able to think through things more critically, more creatively, more effectively, and more efficiently and apply it to multiple situations. And it also kind of reignited my general passion for learning and development...*

In spite of (and sometimes because of) acknowledged challenges related to language and cultural barriers, participants spoke of study abroad in glowing terms, positioning it as the experience that developed their tolerance, confidence, strength, and problem-solving. Their enthusiasm for the subject appeared likely to lead the unfolding narrative in this direction given any encouragement. A few struggled with specifying skills developed abroad but all seemed globally engaged by the experience, sharing stories with ease. One participant spoke of her time abroad prompting a “personal values evaluation,” crediting cultural immersion for her character development.

### **Constraining Forces**

Each participant also initiated dialogue on challenges they either grew from or continued to struggle with as they shared background stories influencing the employability narrative. These challenges are categorized as constraining forces because participants perceived them as limitations in circumstance. No participant was asked specifically about problems or obstacles they encountered, so the dominant themes here emerged unprompted in the context of answering other questions. In divulging the details of their challenges, participants demonstrated that even constraints played a role in propelling the narrative forward.

**‘Failure’ as a motivational turning point.** As the employability narrative emerged in the co-construction of interview dialogue, participants were encouraged to reflect on changes in their storyline and what may have triggered them. Many reported growing from a negative experience, such as a job rejection, because it helped them learn more about themselves and the work they chose to pursue, while also bringing their attention to an important pragmatic reality of focusing on future work. Internally, likely with encouraging feedback, participants had already deconstructed and reframed negative experiences as necessary learning and development.

*Failing an exam.* For Kathryn, a failing score on an exam in Inorganic Chemistry caused her to weigh the value of a Chemistry major with “doing something that I actually cared about and was passionate about.” The proactive disposition of participants self-selecting into the study may be a factor here, for many spoke similarly of “failures” triggering career-related decisions.

*Internship rejection.* For several participants, the internship rejection served as a wake-up call as they reimagined their roles positioned within a more competitive job market than previously thought, replacing a laissez-faire attitude toward the job search with a more vigorous approach. Some responded to the rejection by increasing the number of applications they submitted while others focused on the need to shift the job application process earlier in the school year to optimize chances of success.

*Graduate school plan not materializing.* This theme emerged frequently among participants who had initially assumed the inevitability of graduate school immediately following college. As juniors and seniors, they began thinking more about alternatives to the path of continual schooling. This consideration prompted some panic and more practical thinking, for graduate school was viewed as an extension of their college-granted moratorium and postponement of “real life,” while the job search was viewed as immediate, practical, and competitive.

Asked about an “elevator pitch,” Emma responded that this idea was relatively new to her because she had focused exclusively on her plan of going straight from college into nursing school:

*I didn't really need to have one for nursing school or something like that, so I'm still working on my pitch.*

A surprise rejection from her nursing school of choice altered this progression of further education, jump-starting a concentration on what jobs she might apply for and how she would present herself:

*All throughout college, I wanted to go to nursing school, like, after, so the whole job part after college didn't even come across to me. And then, I don't know, this year sometime, I kind of do want to work and get some job experience and so then, if I don't like it, I'll think about school after that.*

The presumption of graduate school surfaced in many participant narratives. When it ceased to be a certainty, expressions of distress preceded a productive line of thinking:

*Kara: I'm going to have three more years of school, so I'll find a job after that. I was more focused on the academics but then I started realizing that I may not have three more years of school. I may have something a little bit closer. Then I started to think about how I'm going to make myself look employable.*

Like Stephanie distinguishing between “employable” and “enrollable,” Kara reveals dichotomous reasoning that juxtaposes the plan to attend graduate school with, if that falls through, the need to “look employable.”

**The double-edged sword of social comparison.** Social comparison could be characterized as both a driving and constraining force, but it is listed here as a constraint since it was embedded in the dialogic context of pressure and distress. Comparison was such a potent force that it appeared to mold personal notions of employability and internalized perceptions of reasonable career progress. As, for example, in the discussion on internships, comparing oneself to peers was the most common point of reference in interview dialogue. Although questions probed individual narratives, peers were integral to the conversation as they repeatedly set the standard. Participants conceptualized “employable” not according to news media or course content as the author, focused on news and scholarly literature, may have expected but from an informal comparison with well-regarded peers.

In the following statement, Chantelle begins with social comparison but then reassures herself:

*I'm comparing myself to the ideal and that's hard and that's a lot but, at the end of the day, I have to remember that even my basic characteristics are OK to find a job.*

In contrast, Sylvia describes a sense of panic that grew as she formed impressions of employable peers and compared herself unfavorably:

*I think when the urgency really presented itself was as I was working in a field school this summer and I was around people in my major. Working very closely with people, listening to what they were doing, I think it was more that I was comparing myself to where they were and I wasn't feeling adequate in that way and I started to worry. And I started to worry that I didn't have these things. These people seemed like more together than I did and it started to scare me that I was going to get behind and not going to get employed.*

Amplified by social media, patterns of social comparison emerged as a steady influence on this generational cohort, infiltrating thought processes in shared and individual contexts.

*Tiffany: I start seeing people on Facebook, 'I got an internship with so and so.' So I really wish I got that job or I applied for that and didn't get it. It makes me feel a bit down as well.*

Although social comparison is not directly discussed in subsequent sections, it remains an important background theme. Participants seemed highly cognizant of their peers' decision-making, including lamenting peers' lack of employability, and used them as a frame of reference on most topics.

### **The Social Construction of “Liberal Arts” in the Context of Employability: Dominant Discourses in Narrative Integration**

#### **Research Question 2D: “How are students informally socialized to develop their employability?”**

Participants discussed their identification as liberal arts majors at length, contributing to a complicated social construction of “liberal arts” within employability narratives. When it came to generating theory from participant dialogue, interpretation of this discussion led to some of the most salient findings of the study. The mixed feelings apparent in liberal arts majors' identity formation resonated with clarity and emotion as they constructed the meaning of their major in a social context.

#### **Acceptance of the Liberal Arts Narrative**

To the extent that participants embraced liberal arts and integrated it within their pitch to employers, they anchored expressions of working identity in interpersonal skill development, such as understanding and communicating well with others. Participants tended to use the term “soft skills,” so that language is adopted here. Although few were content to project themselves as “liberal arts majors” (they preferred to identify by specific major), those who did use the language of liberal arts positively assumed a humanistic stance.



Asked to identify contributions to employability as liberal arts majors, responses repeatedly turned to examples of soft skills:

*Karilyn: I think being aware of diversity and having cultural competency. So really people always say that they're open-minded, you know, but what do they do with that?*

*Maggie: I think the development of soft skills in a lot of my classes. That's been a big thing, like critical thinking skills, analytical skills, like basic communication skills. Particularly in writing and, yeah, just, like, the broad ability to connect different subjects, especially, like, intercepting disciplines, so that's been one big thing.*

Other participants, also turning to soft skills in response to questions about employability, emphasized non-disciplinary traits as most transferrable in the job market:

*Caitlin: You can really, even being a liberal arts major, you can really set yourself apart from other people in terms of, like, your character and how you present yourself.*

*Sylvia: There aren't particular skills you can transfer for every job, but there's definitely attributes and it's more like an open personality of being friendly, wanting to create a positive atmosphere.*

Erica and Sylvia both placed soft skills at the center of their narratives as liberal arts majors in the fields of political science and anthropology respectively:

*Erica: For liberal arts, your GPA probably isn't as important. It's still important, don't get me wrong, but it's not as important. You don't need the 4.0 but what you do need to do is you need to communicate to these companies. 'Cause that's kind of where we're based out of, you know; we're based out of communications... I think it's easier for political science majors to probably project our experiences, our ideals, our views, our morals, whatever onto employers 'cause that's what we do on a daily basis.*

*Sylvia: So in anthropology they teach us how to understand people. They teach us how to look at a group and understand what they're going to do... I think I'll be able to sell myself as someone who's good with people and who's been taught to meld into a culture to become part of it and to help improve it and work with it as opposed to somebody who's trying to run against the flow.*

Participants reflected upon what they believed employers value, expressing uncertainty in the process. Here Sylvia implies that disciplinary knowledge may be undervalued but concedes that socializing will play a major role in her future workplace:

*As a liberal arts major, you do an exceptional lot of group work. Basically every class you take has a group element, working with somebody in a pair or working in a large group setting, so I think that's what really matters when you're trying to learn to work with people. I think what should matter is the knowledge that you gain and with the secondary of being able to work with people. So obviously in the liberal arts larger field, you have to be able to work with people. You'd never be in an office working by yourself.*

With less hesitancy, Emma embraced the association between interpersonal skills and liberal arts:

*Liberal arts majors are more empathetic and they care and they're more, like, interactive with people in a sense. So I would use that as my brand.*

Cautious optimism tempered other participants' discussion of liberal arts and branding. Chantelle described liberal arts metaphorically as the "hub of alternative routes," suggesting the traditional assumption of a liberal arts foundation leading flexibly to multiple career pathways. The mantra of liberal arts is portrayed as a leap of faith in anticipation of the adaptive work of adulthood:

*I've gotta be adult about things. I have to sell my car, you know, do certain things that I'm not ready yet. And I have to look for alternative routes and hopefully I'm having faith in liberal arts. That is the hub of alternatives routes, so I don't know.*

The ambivalence here was echoed by other participants and will be further explored as participants make sense of the societal value placed on liberal arts majors today. Students seemed aware both that their credentials could be undervalued and that, in a pool of homogeneously credentialed applicants, it would be necessary to stand out.

### **The Plural Self: Versatility and Packaging**

Possibly the most striking aspect of this study's interviews was the emphatic insistence on a plural self and discomfort packaging diverse interests into a singular narrative or "brand" for employers. Some participants criticized the felt need to reduce their complicated selves in accordance with job search conventions:

*Monika: Being liberal arts, it's very difficult, especially in this job market today to find a job that's related to what you actually want to do with your career and so I think it's important. Like branding, it's a harsh term. I only say that*

*because it's one term for the entirety of a person and I don't think it's possible to package me as in one pretty bow. So I think that there's multiple sides of me and each aspect has its own brand per se. So like, I come across, at least I hope I come across, as an assertive or powerful woman, but I think it's very important, too, that I also brand the fact that I'm empathetic to other people's concerns and that I'm understanding and a good listener.*

Further questioning uncovered explanations for the insistence on pluralism and versatility, the resistance toward packaging, and the struggle to integrate diverse interests and experiences to achieve a cohesive narrative.

**The plural self.** Like Monika's emphasis on "multiple sides of me," other participants reported that part of what drew them to a major within liberal arts and sustained their interest was the exploration of course options, allowing them to select a broad program of studies reflecting their range of interests. Students who presented themselves as content said their studies offered a breadth and depth of inquiry they did not feel could be acquired elsewhere at the university. For Roderick, a major in Labor and Employment Relations with a minor in Spanish, that balance of depth and breadth had been achieved, but only through the give-and-take process of balancing multiple interests:

*I came in as an undecided because I didn't want to focus strictly on Spanish. I didn't want to focus strictly on technology. I didn't want to strictly focus on any of the sciences. So I had to kind of understand what I was doing and how broad I wanted to go. And I think that I've narrowed that down enough, whereas I can present that to people in a positive way.*

Participants prided themselves on being "adaptable," "open," and "well-rounded," all of which were coded frequently in analysis. They reflected on their many "layers" in emergent narratives, and were quick to articulate that they were more than one major or sum of experiences just as they worked to synthesize those experiences in response to interview-like questions. The self-advocacy that participants maintained as they presented plural selves came across here:

*Caleb: I'm not a very rigid person where I have to go on this track. I feel like I'm very open-minded, so I could bounce around here and there.*

*Farah: I'm very well-rounded. I can focus on one thing if I need to and get it done. I'm very open to talking to different people from different cultures to learn about who they are and where they come from. I'm open to learning new languages so that shows that I can tolerate and accept others for who they are.*

In discussions like these, participants appeared to strategize selling points of marketability. They naturally drifted toward themes associated with employability such as resourcefulness, creativity, proactivity, and openness. In doing so, they anticipated malleable working identities adapting to changes of circumstance.

**Resistance to labels.** With so many students describing their openness, adaptability, and well-rounded disposition or skill set, it was not surprising to hear them eschew the labels and archetypes that may exclude an aspect of who they are as appealing candidates:

*Kara: I'm not really, I don't really think I have one path and I want to still be adaptable. So I don't want to just label myself one way or carry myself a certain way if I don't know if that's really what I should be doing.*

*Jahari: I'm very anti-branding, anti-label. I think people have been labelled too much in the past and labelling things is what's getting our society close-minded. Because every time you label something, they need to put people into groups. So if you label one person, then, OK, this person fits the label. After you label people, you get groups. Then the groups get into the group thing and with group thinking, you get things like, 'Oh, we're better than them' competition. The competition kind of breeds animosity and then over time just kind of blows up into, like, this whole big powder keg of, like, we've labeled these people. So now these groups are going at each other. I try to stay away from labels. I don't find it helpful.*

*Lucero: I definitely want to be referenced as a well-respected, responsible person. A person who is willing to put others first regarding labels.*

*Monika: I don't have, like, an elevator pitch because I don't like to market myself in one way.*

**The struggle to differentiate and synthesize.** Although participants did not want to be labelled or branded, they understood the need to distinguish themselves and most expressed interest in improving their self-presentation, on paper and in person. Still, they were uncertain how to achieve this. Several had never heard of the phrase “elevator pitch.” Questions about “marketing strategy” led often to “I don't know.” Students used this line of questioning as an opportunity to ask of the author, “Well, what do you think my skills are as a liberal arts major?” The following excerpts capture some of this uncertainty:

*Katia: I did go to one internship interview this summer... And the person interviewing was a boss for, I think, a Fortune 500 company, something like that or consulting for them and it was a very start-up business and when she*

*was asking me, 'Well, what can you give me?' Like, 'What can you do for me?' I drew a blank. And that's when she quickly wrapped up the interview. And I felt really, I guess, torn down from that.*

*Sylvia: Honestly, I'm not sure how I'm going to do that. You could take every class and every bit of advice people give you but it's still very hard to decide how you're going to put it all together, especially coming from a blue-collar family who when, for an interview, you go in and say 'I have a high-school education, I can do this job,' but when you go into these higher-level professions, I have almost no idea what to say. And I've done the mock interviews and I've done the questions. It seems almost as though I have to eloquently tell them about my experience working and my experience in education, but other than that, I'm kind of lost as to what I'm supposed to say and what they want to hear.*

Many explained they had never been asked for a pitch or marketing strategy, especially in the context of liberal arts:

*Lucero: I really don't know how I will talk about it [in an interview] because I don't really do it at all because it's not asked of me, and since it's not asked, I don't think of it.*

Several participants compared themselves negatively to peers in business majors, who they believe had more experience and support in developing marketability, but the differences were also attributed to attitude and personality. The underlying logic seemed to be that, in business, one accepted the enterprising mindset of pursuing credentials to become a successful commodity in a competitive job market. In the business culture, concepts of employability are introduced early, inculcating the branding spirit. Here are examples of unprompted references to the School of Business, an unexpected and consistently emergent theme:

*Jessa: I feel like that packaging makes me think of the business side of things. And with liberal arts, as much as I want to deny it, it exists. So I'm going to have to, you know, tie myself in a little box and put a nice bow on it and sell myself to try and get interest in me.*

*Kathryn: Actually, that's funny because my sister's in Smeal. So she's talking about, like, the branding and everything. But she's only a freshman so I don't know if she actually knows what that means yet. So yeah, I do see a need to brand myself.*

*Angelo: My girlfriend, she's in the Smeal College of Business, and a lot of my skills that I've gotten from interviews and stuff, like résumé building, is from her because of the Smeal. They're trying to get their students to graduate and work and all these companies are coming.*

Even for some who expressed discomfort with labels, boxes, or brands, the endeavor to differentiate prompted an embrace of individual branding, employed strategically by a few to optimize the probability of job success. “Brand” emerges as a relevant construct at the crux of impression-making in the job search:

*Roderick: I think that having a brand is really central because you need to set yourself apart from people in some way or another. And whether that’s one specific thing or some mantra or some ideal that you want to spread out into the world, I think that type of branding is necessary. And it’s difficult for me because that involves completely narrowing myself down, but I absolutely think it’s necessary.*

*Katia: There are so many people competing for that one job and you have to find a way to stick out. When it comes to my own brand, I think I’m developing it for sure through things like LinkedIn.*

*Jared: Brand is what people recognize, so I make business cards for myself because of the networking events that I’ve gone to. And I have a variety of unique twists on them. So I put a QR reader that goes right to my LinkedIn profile. So I believe there are little things that can contribute to a person’s brandability. At the end of the day, you’re trying to make yourself stand out.*

Struggles to pitch a liberal arts employability narrative suggest difficulty operationalizing self-promotion, extracting the skills and attributes most useful to persuade future employers. An exception is the handful of students who seized upon the opportunity to differentiate, such as Jared adding technological savvy to the liberal arts identity with a QR reader on his business card. For others, in the absence of more technical or identifiable credentials, individual branding felt generic and diffuse. They all valued softer skills as marketable, but many appeared inexperienced and uncertain in the face of articulating that applicability. The next section examines common elements in the dialogue of participants who achieved narrative coherence.

**Narrative coherence in packaged credentials.** Participants who exhibited a detailed, flowing narrative of employability in response to interview questions shared one interesting commonality: each spoke eloquently of either multiple majors or an added minor or emphasis as representative of their diverse interests. In contrast to students who struggled to differentiate themselves in words, these students took pride in their standing-out strategizing. The decision-making process of expanding goal credentials beyond the singular major appeared to trigger enhanced self-awareness, cultivating skills and characteristics to strengthen overall job candidacy. They spoke

confidently of this novel balance and integrative expertise. Here are a few examples of that dialogue:

*Stephanie: And so I have been able to cast a wide net with a diverse skill set. I have a liberal arts and a science degree, which not many people have, but I was able to conjoin and kind of make it coherent also with that added minor.*

*Jared: I always say this to people: the economics degree is sort of the one that will give me the job; the Spanish degree is the one I can talk about.*

*Caleb: I would say I definitely get a contrast between my two majors, where my political science major is a lot more kind of that open thinking where you can do anything, even the class structure is like that. Econ, it's very, like, focused, very rigid, focused on practicality and proofs and everything like that, just in its nature. And I think the contrast between my two majors, which are like the bulk of my classes, kind of gives me a good balance between the two, where I can see what it's like to be broad and I can see what it's like to be focused. And that's definitely played a big role in me during my job search in the sense of finding a good balance between the two.*

A few of these next “packaged” students began in the College of Business but chose to add a liberal arts major (history in one case, economics in the other). They spoke of the liberal arts major as piquing employer interest and serving to differentiate them from a mostly homogeneous pool of accomplished business majors:

*Ryan: I would say, honestly, history was more useful to me, just because it gave me something different. Shaped myself and gave me something to talk about. Everybody in [redacted], they're all going for the same banking jobs. We're all finance majors, but now I'm a history major, too. When I was at my [redacted] interview, I had a conversation about World War I and history with one of my interviewers for around 15 minutes. That took up half the time. I could tell it was going well then.*

*Tom: I think having different backgrounds with the two sides really works well together. And I think my understanding is, like, once I graduate, instead of just being a student with one or the other, having this added – not experience, 'cause it's not experience – but it's just this added knowledge from different points of view. I think it could really benefit me.*

Multi-layered credentialing occurred when students took the initiative to formally blend multiple interests with varied coursework to enhance employability, but not all students spoke of this with intentionality. For those who did, layers of diverse academic emphases represented a comprehensive university portfolio, and they were ready to promote this as balance and versatility. Ryan noted that he would be unlikely to

utilize his history knowledge in working capacities, but he regarded the critical thinking and ‘schmoozing’ from his added history degree as the best possible decision aiding long-term employability.

## **Stigma**

Previous excerpts have alluded to the negative perceptions associated with a liberal arts major, a topic explored here in depth because the majority of participants spoke of this as a concern. They often used the word “stigma” and, for some, “stereotypes” inferred from comments made by family, friends, and acquaintances. With the exception of one international student referencing the college’s slogan of the “Liberal Arts edge” and forecasting broad labor market receptivity to liberal arts majors based on faculty and staff input, participants generally expressed doubt about general perceptions of their credentials.

**Stigma associated with the non-technical major.** The stigmatization of students from liberal arts or “non-technical” majors stemmed from a characterization of these graduates as less likely to procure employment in professional occupations because they were assumed to lack the technical skills for graduate employability. The “graduate” employability in this context distinguishes aspirational jobs related to one’s undergraduate degree from general employment prospects.

Participants expressed less automatic attachment to the labor market and a less timely, less obvious employment trajectory, but they repeatedly voiced confidence in their foundation of core soft skills for job prospects. They tended to separate affective responses from stereotypical perceptions, although both weighed heavily on narrative construction. The following statements capture this discussion of self-presentation as prospective liberal arts graduates in a hierarchy of job seekers:

*Caitlin: You know, the stigma is that STEM majors are a lot smarter than liberal arts majors, at least for me and what I’ve gone through. That’s what I’ve always heard.*

*Katia: Um, I guess the joke about liberal arts students is: Major in something you love because you’ll never work a day in your life because your field probably isn’t hiring. That’s sort of how I feel sometimes. Liberal arts college is very big. What are my chances?*

*Farah: Being a liberal arts major, we’re seen as people who aren’t going to get good paying jobs right away.*



*Sylvia: Every time employability comes up, as a general rule for liberal arts students, it's like a little bit of dread. Am I employable? I took a liberal arts degree and I think all of us at one point regret that, regret not going into a technical degree. Because it just seems so insurmountable to get a job as a liberal arts student.*

*Emma: I think people underestimate liberal arts, definitely. Because they think 'Oh, all they have to do is read, they barely get any homework- blah, blah, blah.' I'm like, 'No, we do a lot more!'*

*Kathryn: Experience is critical in liberal arts because it's not technical per se, so you definitely need the experience in something particular or something that you want to pursue. Which is unfortunate, you know, because it is a well-rounded education. Well-rounded versus super narrow-focused. I mean, I think that's just a society thing, too. It's an unfortunate bias that society has that oh, technical, you have this skill set we want. I think, as liberal arts students, you have to work harder to get that experience. And if that means accepting unpaid internships then, yeah, that's what you have to do.*

Comments suggest wavering confidence in the prospects of the liberal arts major, casting individual micro-narratives within a macro-narrative of economic reality and societal judgment. The perceived stigma extended to the assumption that the liberal arts major was not viable in the labor market without a graduate degree. Ellen viewed this reasoning as warranted but offered more context for comparison:

*You basically need grad school after liberal arts degrees, which is true for science degrees, too, but somehow science degrees don't get a bad reputation. I keep thinking, like, that maybe I should have gone for biology, but there's nothing I'd be able to do with a major in biology that I can't do with a major in psychology. You know, you're just as limited with a major in biology or physics as you are with a liberal arts degree, but somehow liberal arts has gotten the worst rap.*

It was not clear to what extent participants internalized the stigma related to employability and proactively strategized to counter it. The inevitability of graduate school arose as one way of resolving the conflict associated with this stigma. Similar to the rationale of the “packaged self,” graduate school offered the benefit of layered credentials to extend and diversify the employability narrative.

**Reconciling mixed messages about the validity and worth of one's degree.** Weighing a favorable portrayal of their major from faculty and staff with derisive comments from others, a few participants expressed emotional dissonance in estimating their major's worth. Sylvia, previously quoted on stereotypes she encountered, felt just as uneasy about comments overstating job prospects:

*From every liberal arts advisor, you'll get told you're very employable. You'll get told that you could do anything, that you could work anywhere, that a liberal arts degree is just like a blank degree that tells them that you're a good writer, a good communicator, and you could work anywhere.*

Another participant, Jared, wrestled with the meaning of his degree with regards to employability as he recalled a professor's philosophical about the purpose of college:

*In this basic level gen ed class, the professor talked a lot about: Are you here in college on a hero's journey or a coward's journey? He said the hero's journey would be, you know, really questioning why are you here, doing what you love, and then he said the coward's journey would be getting a degree to get a job. I sort of disagree on that because at the end of the day, you're here to get a degree that will get you a job, perhaps so you can be financially stable. That's a reality, you know what I mean?*

Sylvia and Jared's comments reveal discordant perceptions about the long-term investment in a liberal arts degree and a deeper line of questioning regarding the purpose of higher education. Rather than seek reassurance, both wanted explicit guidance on what to expect and how to prepare for that, a practical reconciliation of mixed messages. The dilemma in this situation relates to narrative coherence, with vastly different employability perspectives challenging underlying logic in the co-construction of a marketable storyline.

### **On the Margins: Negotiating Perceptions of Self and Services**

Students representing working class and minority groups initiated dialogue on structural barriers that played a role in defining their emergent employability and their struggles to overcome them. With less of a connection to the university community, many felt unsure if the return on their investment in a college education would match that of more privileged peers. For these narratives, "liberal arts" was not the only stigma and gradations of adversity became a more central theme. This was especially the case with first-generation college students, who represented almost half of participants in this study.

#### **First-Generation College Students**

These participants reported more barriers in utilizing student services, job search planning, and navigating unfamiliar institutions and networks. Their early career

narratives were tempered by apprehension, for they reported less familial guidance and timid business acumen. The cultural capital they grew up with, in a few cases, clashed with university culture. Sometimes this meant lacking the tacit knowledge for socializing into professional-caliber positions. Straddling two cultures of home and school complicated the pursuit of graduate employability and, for non-White students, race could exacerbate perceptions of divisiveness. Comments below represent a range of reflection on first-generation status as it relates to employability, from emotive channeling to pragmatic uncertainty:

*Chantelle: I think my advisor, she didn't have much, like, experience with people. I think the closest she came to my background was probably watching The Wire. You know, like something that has nothing to do with it. And I don't think she knew how much I wanted it [the degree]. That's, like, the biggest thing for people like me because once you've given up, you have so many people OKing that in your world.*

*Kara: I think some people whose parents may have been college educated, they've had a little more direct guidance from their parents.*

*Brianna: Those networking events that you need to have. It really helps with everything you do after school, so I've heard. I'm not really sure right now, but everybody tells me that's something that I have to work on. I think that's a really important thing that you go to college for, just because everyone who goes to college says so. And no one in my family obviously has told me those things.*

*Jared: I definitely think a lot of kids use their parents as a resource, whether it would be using their parents to get an internship, whether it would be getting career advice from their parents, or asking questions about major, things like that. I feel like it's hard to have those kind of conversations with my mom or dad. I feel like they never went through the college experience. I mean, it's a stressful time as much as it is a time to grow personally and professionally. They never really had that so it's sort of, I have a disconnect with them.*

*Erica: College comes first and then work comes second but I still have bills to pay so I need to figure out a way to manage my time between class and working, making enough money to pay off bills. So I would say that's probably the biggest struggle being a first-generation college student because my parents don't understand where, like, the line needs to be drawn.*

As the first to go to college in their family, participants also spoke of that identity with pride and referred to it as motivational:

*Chantelle: The storyline of my employability is that I don't come from much, so I can make so much out of nothing. And I get a crazy thrill out of proving people wrong. It's almost like that's what's getting me by.*

*Jared: I guess it's just my opinion but, definitely, I think, knowing my parents didn't have the same opportunity that I've had but they are encouraging me to really make the most of my time here. I feel like I owe it to them and I owe it to myself to really do that.*

The developing persona of the first-generation college student offers grist for compelling narrative given the proactive resourcefulness leading many to persist in a degree program. However, given the less-defined pathways to graduate employment for students in some liberal arts majors, additional coaching to bolster confidence and cultural capital in students at a positional disadvantage seems warranted. Services like the Career Enrichment Network play a key role for first-generation college students by connecting them to alumni mentors, scholarships, and networks, both informal and structured. Many of these students vocalized the value of this asset, especially the alumni mentoring program.

### **Transfer Students**

Several of the first-generation college students interviewed were transfer students who had transitioned from 2-year colleges or satellite campuses and, in the absence of parental or university career guidance, reported both additional challenges and a determined outlook. As a student at a satellite campus, Katia described begging for transportation for a 50-minute drive to an internship fair because “you had to go to fairs outside of the actual campus to get employed.” Here she notes the shortcomings of a small career center:

*There was only one person on campus who did counseling, so I felt [name redacted] was very swamped most of the time, so I didn't feel I should waste her time with trying to get my résumé fixed.*

For transfer students, a common theme was the stark comparison between limited career services at the satellite campus and extensive career services at the main campus. They expressed difficulty reorienting themselves, navigating a strikingly different university culture than the one in which they started. These descriptions capture some of that difficulty and change process:

*Sylvia: I could have been an Honors Scholar, but I didn't do the paperwork mostly because, at the satellite, it was very nebulous how to get it. Like nobody said, 'This is how you become part of the Schreyer Honors College, this is how you do honors classes.'*

*David: It was really overwhelming because I had never visited here either. I moved up on Sunday before classes so that's kind of like a crash course. I learned everything and I got all of those emails. And started thinking about the career fair. I was really, really set on getting an internship because I vowed never to do manual labor again.*

Transfer students in this study juggled multiple responsibilities beyond the transition. They were more likely to report working at least part-time hours to support themselves while in school. This time allocation seemed to lessen availability for coursework, extracurricular involvement, and seeking out student services, a logistic constraint that could limit socializing gateways into professional employment.

### **International Students**

Other participants on the boundary of success (in this instance, legally) were international students. Only two international student point of views are represented in this study and both are young women from China, but the difference in knowledge and perspective between them is notable.

Jiayi had come to the U.S. as a community college student and then transferred to the university prior to declaring a major. She had been employed in China and the U.S., procured a competitive internship, and worked on-campus jobs, thoughtfully explaining all measures taken to move forward in life with purpose. Here she describes a few of the obstacles she encountered:

*As international students we can work on campus, so it's not so difficult to find a job on campus. But when we get the transition that we are leaving the school, we need to face the society, so that's the transition time that makes people pressure.*

*Fall semester, I went to the career fair and I found it's very frustrated because in the university we kind of face more society. And then when we go to career fair, usually when international students hand the résumé, they will ask, 'Are you a citizen?' And if you are not, they say, 'We don't hire international students.' So it's quite frustrating and I found that the real world would be very cruel.*

Unlike Jiayi, Lian had no work experience in either country, so her impressions stemmed from what she had seen and heard. Lian was optimistic about her job prospects in the U.S., having only absorbed positive messages about the economic currency of a liberal arts degree and psychology, her chosen major. In the following exchange, she describes the difference in employability between the two cultures:

Author: Do you think that there's a difference between the Chinese culture and the American culture in how we think about employability?

Lian: *I think in China, like, positions they terminate everything but in the United States, I think, like, the ability the person actually has determines the employability.*

Author: So in the United States, you feel like there may be more opportunities?

Lian: *Yeah, there is.*

Author: Can you explain that further about how it applies to you?

Lian: *So in terms of, like, it's my personal experience but it kind of, I don't know if it's right to talk about because, like, in the United States, I found it more difficult to find an internship because, like, everyone is equal here.*

Lian was encountering difficulty finding work in the U.S. but her narrative did not reflect the scope of this challenge yet, for she viewed the job market as competitive but egalitarian. At the conclusion of the interview, she asked:

*Do you know any international students? Do they have hard time finding work in the United States?*

The brief exchange that followed indicated she knew little about the restrictions of international student visas and how that would affect employment.

## **On Success and Integral Themes**

### **Redefining Success: Intrinsic Rewards**

One of the final interview questions revealed more about the student rationale for investing in the liberal arts undergraduate major. The question was, "What does success mean to you?" Although a few responses did mention getting out of debt, they were otherwise altruistic and free of monetary or material emphasis. In fact, dialogue here

was remarkably uniform thematically, envisioning future scenarios of social impact and genuine love of work. “Happiness” and “impact” were the most frequently occurring codes, depicting aspirations consistent with expressed personal values. Emergent themes crossed intersecting identities of gender, race, and ethnicity in the participants represented:

*Kathryn: So success to me is finding something that I enjoy doing. I define success as, you know, if I'm passionate about it and I love it. And I say, 'Hey, I'm going to work today.'*

*Caitlyn: This sounds so cliché but I hope I really enjoy and I'm happy with what I do and I think that's successful.*

*Lucero: I want to be the person that changes the way people think about law enforcement.*

*Nelia: Success would be me finding a job that, like, I wanna go to every day. Regardless if I make, like, a ton of money or it's enough to, like, live life comfortably, I just want to find a job that I, like, don't dread waking up to go to in the morning, I guess.*

*Jared: Success would be doing what you love to the best of your ability or doing what you're good at to the best of your ability and making an impact, a positive impact, on another person.*

*Farah: Success means getting a job that not only pays well to pay off all the loans, but also is something that I enjoy doing and others around me enjoy doing and actually makes a difference.*

*Monika: So, like, success for my parents revolves around money and for me it involves, like, bettering people's lives. So I think that, like, looking at that, we have different ways going about how we market ourselves. So, like, I choose to volunteer most of my time. Whereas, for my parents, it was more beneficial to work rather than volunteer their time.*

Participants described the future in abstract, prosocial language. They were modest and uncertain of vocational outcomes, though a few ventured guesses about probable occupations. Mostly they expressed interest in finding enjoyable work that would support continual growth. Consistent with the growth mindset, they appeared open to the lifelong work of employability management so long as it helped support purpose-driven work lives. Reflections on success underlined a moral arc in the narrative and sense of vocational calling since, ultimately, students were drawn toward something larger than themselves.

## **Passion, Authenticity, and Proactive Adaptability as Signature Traits**

Participants ascribed personal meaning to characterization of their attitude and approach to finding work. A few attributes were so commonly expressed that they emerged as core categories, centering the individual with a comfortably recurrent talking point. The value-laden attributes most often mentioned, explicit and implied, were passion, authenticity, and proactive adaptability. In sum, they merged to shift liberal arts employability narratives toward a mantra of positive identity, countering the external skills-based emphasis. The prevalence of these leanings suggests intrinsic factors predisposing students to majors and occupations that reinforce and accentuate core values. Although many participants had a limited sense of how they would apply disciplinary knowledge to marketable skills, all tended to reorient discussion toward grounding beliefs. Signature latent traits emerged as a more comfortable zone in the interview setting than strategizing self-promotion.

### **Passion:**

Participants spoke frequently of passion as leading career development choices, freely offering stories of enthusiasm for vocational interests. This inclination seemed to cross lines of accumulated work experience and academic preparedness, possibly emerging as a trait that could unite liberal arts majors and graduates.

Jahari: [in response to, “How do you want to be known?”] *Just as a person who loves history. Like not... just... yeah, just a lover of history. Like not really even as a label, but still just... That’s when I describe my passion, is a lover of history. I’ve always loved history because I’ve studied history since I was a kid. Like I read too many books, like war and, like, history. I feel that’s more like a passion than anything else.*

For Tiffany, discovering her passion in conversation with others emerged as pivotal in the developing narrative. This clarified a self-understanding not readily apparent in her student role on campus:

*I went to my cousin’s wedding and I remember everyone comes up to you and says, ‘What are you doing? What you pursuing?’ And that’s when I was so passionate about what I want to do and it’s so much easier to explain myself to them. And then saying, like, I did a minor because I want to do this. They’re like, ‘Wow!’ It makes it even more shocking for them. I think that’s when it really did hit me. This is what I want to do for a living.*



In Tiffany's storyline, like many of her cohorts, understanding of career identity coalesced with growing attachment to degree emphases. The repetition of explaining a chosen major and minor crystalized a sense of passion and vocational calling.

### **Authenticity:**

In describing strong vocational or academic interests, participants also expressed the importance of consistent self-portrayal. They wanted attributes and achievements to come across naturally in an interview and accurately represent their past. The inclination toward authenticity was introduced in the context of discussing related categories, such as disciplinary passion. It also resonated through discussion of the reluctant embrace of branding, growing out of a concern that the perceived brand would not fully represent the candidate.

*Chantelle: Hopefully, I'll have a level head and that will come through to other people and that genuinity, if that's even a word, that will come through and I'll just find someone who wants to take a chance on someone.*

*Jahari: [on interviews] I don't prepare because I want to give them, like, myself and not, like, another personality or version of myself. No matter what, you can present yourself in an interview one way but, like, if you're not truthful and honest, eventually, if they do hire you, they'll find out later. I found that the best way to prepare yourself is to be as natural and honest as possible because trying to get a recommendation from a former employer who has seen you've been switching around and kind of two-faced is very detrimental to your career.*

The emphasis on authenticity reinforces a desire for congruent elements in the employability narrative. Responses here typify participants' underlying values that drove the job-seeking process, such as the quality or state of being genuine.

### **Proactive Adaptability:**

In the verbalized inclination toward self-development, adaptability emerged as a recurrent theme in the majority of participant responses, from early conceptualization of employability to open-ended visions of a future working reality. "Proactive" is added as a qualifier because many introduced the notion of adaptability with examples of self-initiative. They alternated between stories of leadership and adaptability in explaining most employable attributes. Adaptability was also spoken of as a virtue, like the open-

mindset adaptation that flourished during study abroad. These examples illustrate adaptability as it emerged in response to questions about what differentiates candidates:

*Maggie: I think particular experiences, my worldview and approach to situations and challenges and I'd say the particular combination of skills that I've garnered. And also my desire and ability to learn quickly and adapt to new situations.*

*Caitlin: I think flexibility in terms of you have to kind of go with the flow in the business world to an extent. You can still have your rigid views but to a certain extent you have to hear what other people have to say and be flexible in that and problem-solve every day.*

Similar to the initiative it takes to adapt is the receptivity to new experiences. Both mindset attributes ready the job candidate for growth and advancement. When asked what helps her stand out as a candidate, Jiayi responded with an emphasis on her willingness to learn:

*I think for college students it's always willingness to learn new things. I think we can learn from start doing small things. It's not that we are aiming right away for big things.*

Jiayi's modest statement echoes similar comments associating employability with the inevitability of continual skill development. These sentiments occurred in the early, exploratory phase of interview questioning and again toward the end as participants spoke of their future working selves. They clearly thought of themselves as lifelong learners with expressed willingness to take responsibility for learning.

## Summary: The Liberal Arts Employability Narrative

### Research Question 1B: “How do they construct their employability narrative?”

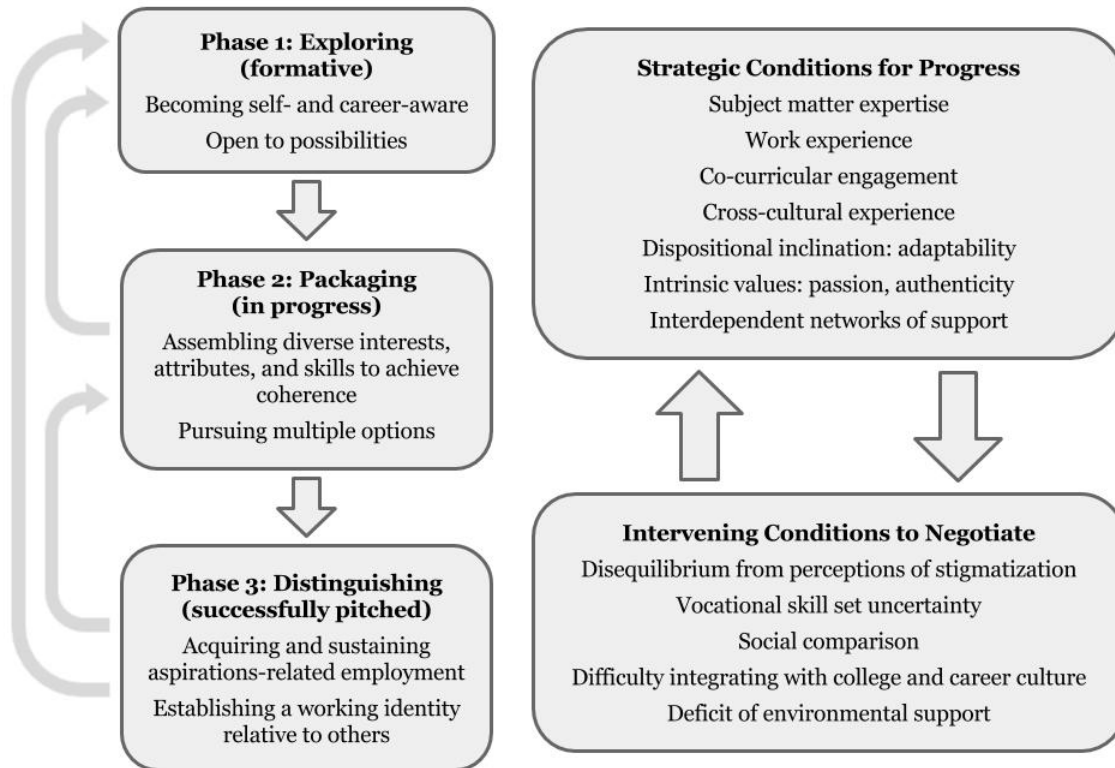


Figure 2. Development of the employability narrative of liberal arts students.

An early expectation in the grounded theory process had been that “archetypes” would emerge, labelling students according to the scope and richness of their employability narratives. Although traditional markers of employability did vary between students (those who had acquired many internships, for example, compared to those with little or no work experience), shared characteristics emerged as more dominant. Participants assembled the personal capital of their narratives in similar ways, drawing heavily on a blend of dispositional attributes, interests, and co-curricular experiences.

Figure 2 illustrates a constructivist framework of the liberal arts employability narrative, proposing phased indicators of advancement as well as facilitative and intervening conditions. Phases are not mutually exclusive or necessarily linear in

progression. Students who struggled most in this study appeared to be in an exploratory phase, whereas students with detailed narratives communicated both ‘packaging’ and ‘distinction’ by discussing the nuanced layers of their employability construction. The categories may overlap and repeat as students adapt to new circumstances that alter career pathways, modifying narratives through experimenting with the reinvention of self addressed by Ibarra (2004) in her book on working identities.

Individual narratives suggest that packaging diverse selves for marketability remains a primary consideration and challenge. Discomfort with branding emerges as students find themselves in majors regarded by others as problematic for employability. Throughout the process, students are continually making sense of employability, even those well along in distinguishing their candidacy in the vagaries of the job market. Although conclusions may be skewed by participants’ voluntary self-selection, their perceptions are consistent with Tomlinson’s (2008) findings on student perceptions of employability; in both cases, students attach considerable interest and concern to employability and anticipate the value of a transferrable skill set. They grasp the fluid construction of employability, viewing it as an aspect of life needing ongoing attention.

Student construction and management of the liberal arts employability narrative could be summarized according to the dimensions that have been discussed in this chapter:

- From subjective, personalized conceptualizations of employability to reflections on success, students assume an identity of interdependence and a vague construction of labor market possibilities.
- Self-management of employability is a gradual, transformative process developed in the proactive work of producing a marketable self amid university-based forces that both drive and constrain the individual.
- Construction of employability derives more from dispositional attributes than technical skills, even though students initially defined “employability” as skill-oriented.
- Self-pluralism emerges as a challenge and opportunity for students to recognize, negotiate, and capitalize on a range of interests and skills.
- Students representing disadvantaged groups face additional barriers that stall or complicate the developing narrative of employability, with the implied recommendation that a culturally responsive campus community would support their assimilation.

In conclusion, students were actively engaged with and motivated by the concept of employability, internalizing the importance of a holistic college education for professional purposes. Their narratives had clearly begun and the uniform themes of authenticity, passion, and adaptability would likely encourage potential employers and bode well for participation in civic life. Critical deconstruction of the liberal arts stigma revealed that students in these majors may need to carefully sculpt narratives that emphasize the integration of disciplinary and dispositional assets for optimal employability. Understanding narrative construction as social, students may benefit from Parks's (2000) definition of interdependence as the realization to "depend upon others without fear of losing the power of the self" (p. 87).

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS FROM SUPPLEMENTAL SOURCES

*“Unless personal development planning is integrated, well-designed, and cleverly organized, it risks being either a time-eating monster or a mere curiosity, inspected by a few enthusiasts”* (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 138).

This chapter presents additional findings from field observations and surveys administered at the end of interview sessions. These data complement narrative analyses by examining the prism of self-constructed employability from different angles, further explaining values and perceptions attached to students’ growing employability. Thematic analysis of surveys also reveals central concerns for discussion.

### Field Observation

To better understand the perspective of the liberal arts student approaching graduation, the author put herself in the position of seeking out career services, attending events, and observing student participation. Career services for liberal arts students, known as the Career Enrichment Network (CEN), is located in a small set of offices on the first floor of an old building near the center of campus. Glossy photos accompanying liberal arts success stories line the hallways and, upon entering the CEN office, a poster proclaims: “Life is not about finding yourself, life is about creating yourself.” Pamphlets with information on study abroad, alumni mentors, and other career-related resources fill the waiting area.

Four of the participants interviewed for this study had never heard of the Career Enrichment Network. Of those four, one was a 5<sup>th</sup>-year student of color who had taken a semester off because she could not pay tuition. Very close to graduation at the time of the study interview, she expressed interest in this service and wished she had known of it sooner. She had given up seeking help from her academic advisor, frustrated from being repeatedly told to switch to an easier major. For students like her, the main source of on-campus information came from academic advisors, professors, and fellow students. They did know that a career services center for the university existed in a far corner of campus, but many had procrastinated on a visit they knew was needed.

CEN’s “Liberal Arts Week” gave students the opportunity to learn and articulate “liberal arts skills” for career development and mobility. Interestingly, these events appeared to bridge perceived gaps between “liberal arts” and “business” with, for example, a slate of corporate speakers to recruit liberal arts majors in

attendance. Representatives from companies such as Target, Deloitte, Kohl's, and Vanguard addressed topics including what employers are looking for, interview skills, and development of a LinkedIn profile. They left students with company paraphernalia, business cards, and invitations to assist in the future job search. Interview participants did not address these events particularly, other than a few saying they wished they had gone. The majority did indicate preference for a non-corporate career trajectory, suggesting dissonance between impact-driven expressed aspirations and profit-driven corporate recruiters.

A further opportunity for observation occurred in the follow-up to interviews as the author conducted résumé, application, LinkedIn, and cover letter critiques at the request of the participant. Invariably, the most common critique given was that résumés contained weak verbiage. Participants bulleted items under jobs with words like “attended meetings,” “shelved books,” “assisted,” and “helped.” In conversation, they were emphatic about leadership skills and spoke highly of responsibilities held, but accomplishments in print were consistently undersold. Another common critique was that résumé objectives alluded to a desire to learn or grow instead of summarizing what the candidate had to offer. Overall, the juniors and seniors interviewed generally seemed accomplished and academically oriented, but several explained that they were writing résumés for the first time, a ritual career activity that had been set aside over the years.

### **Employability Surveys**

Surveys administered for this study shed light on how students understood a range of components related to employability. Since students tended to share stories in depth during the interview, follow-up surveys contrasted that with a broad, cursory view. At the end of interviews, 30 of the 32 participants completed the surveys. Of those 30, 10 were male and 20 were female. They were told that each survey had demonstrated validity and offered another lens through which to interpret individual perceptions of employability. Both surveys consisted of statements with 5-point Likert-scale response choices ranging from low (strongly disagree) to high (strongly agree). Results were analyzed for measures of variability and central tendency. In the following sections, key findings are reported and interpreted, organized by each survey's sub-dimensions.

### The Employability Self-Perception Survey

This study used the self-perceived employability scale constructed and validated by Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell (2008) for university students in the United Kingdom. The survey aimed to reflect a multi-faceted conceptualization of employability in extant literature, encompassing labor-market knowledge (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), skills (Van der Heijden, 2002), and attributes (Fugate et al., 2004). Scale dimensions include: the university's reputation, individual self-confidence and proactivity, external labor market factors, and individual engagement with academic performance. Results from each subsection are listed here in tabular format followed by brief analysis.

Table 3

*Survey Results: Individual Engagement with Academic Performance*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
"I achieve high grades in my undergraduate studies."	4.03	.76	2-5
"I regard my academic work as a top priority."	4.36	.67	3-5

Responses to these statements reflect a positive perception of academic standing, concurring with the prior statement that participants seemed academically oriented and accomplished, evidenced also by the finding that honors college participation emerged as a core category during coding. This demographic influence is an important consideration in interpreting interview findings since the population studied likely represents academically engaged students disproportionately. Eighty-three percent either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I achieve high grades in my undergraduate studies" and even more regarded their academic work as a top priority.



Table 4  
*Survey Results: University's Reputation*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
"Employers are eager to employ graduates from my university."	4.57	.68	3-5
"The status of this university is a significant asset to me in job seeking."	4.43	.73	2-5
"Employers specifically target this university to recruit individuals from my concentration."	3.37	.85	1-5
"My university has an outstanding reputation in my field(s) of study."	3.57	.94	2-5
"I tell my friends that this is a great university to attend."	4.40	.90	1-5
"I find that my values and this university's values are very similar."	3.83	.99	1-5
"I am proud to tell others that I am at this university."	4.6	.93	1-5
"Being at this university inspires my best academic performance."	4.03	.81	1-5
"I am glad I chose this university over others I considered."	4.31	1.07	1-5
"I care about this university and its future."	4.34	.86	1-5
"For me, this is the best of all universities to attend."	3.66	1.14	1-5

Responses were generally positive about the university's reputation but, as the range indicates, a few strongly dissented. Highest agreement came in response to the statements, "Employers are eager to employ candidates from my university" and "I am proud to tell others about this university." These results suggest a branding of the university as participants, perhaps more often than not, emphasize its name in relevant context. Although institutional influence did not explicitly play a dominant role in participants' formative narratives, the implication here is that participants' university name-dropping is generally perceived to help them in networking.

There was less unanimity about whether the university was a good match for each individual, with more participants choosing the middle answer ("neither agree nor

disagree”) in response to, “For me, this is the best of all universities to attend.” This result is consistent with a small but significant minority of interview participants who reportedly felt disengaged with university culture and services.

Table 5

*Survey Results: Individual Confidence and Proactivity*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“I can easily find out about opportunities in my chosen field.”	3.67	1.06	1-5
“The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for.”	4.10	.61	3-5
“I am confident of success in job interviews and recruiting events.”	3.67	1.03	1-5
“I could get any job as long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant.”	4.03	.72	2-5
“I want to be in a position to do mostly work that I really like.”	4.57	.63	3-5
“I am satisfied with the progress I have made meeting my goals for the development of new skills.”	3.93	.79	2-5
“I have clear goals for what I want to achieve in life.”	4.27	.83	2-5
“I regard myself as highly ambitious.”	4.5	.86	2-5
“I feel it is urgent that I get on with my career development.”	4.53	.51	4-5
“What I do in the future isn’t really important.”	1.27	.45	1-2

Perceptions varied considerably in response to statements about the ease with which participants found opportunities in their field, a possible indicator of disparity between those clued into university career and networking systems and those unfamiliar. Disparity was also evident in their expression of self-confidence for interviews. Review of survey data indicates that these two groups tended to be the same individuals, suggesting a bimodal response.

Participants favorably rated their skills, abilities, and goals, but reported less satisfaction with progress, echoing the sense of urgency expressed in interviews. This

discordance suggests optimism for internal employability tempered by some anxiety, recalling peer comparison and worry over falling behind. It is also worth noting that these results suggest a hopeful outlook on employable skills and abilities, countering negative presumptions reported earlier in the discussion of stigmatization.

Table 6

*Survey Results: External Labor Market*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“My chosen major ranks highly in terms of social status.”	2.80	.85	2-4
“People in the career I am aiming for are in high labor market demand.”	3.12	.95	2-5
“My degree is seen as leading to a specific career generally perceived as desirable.”	3.23	.86	2-5
“There is generally a strong demand for graduates at the present time.”	3.17	.87	2-5
“There are plenty of job vacancies in the geographical area where I am seeking.”	3.00	.95	1-5

Addressing external labor market concerns directly, participants revealed limited confidence, particularly in the perception of their chosen major’s social status. Responses also suggest variability, possibly accounted for by differences in the disciplinary paths chosen within liberal arts and the “packaged” factor of so many students opting for the dual degree. Given that few interviewees ventured to discuss labor market conditions, this mix of statements appears to sound a call for constructivist dialogue on the congruence between undergraduate degree qualifications and plausible career pathways. Results reinforce the question of whether students view a major within the College of Liberal Arts as a worthy career investment and whether they foresee structural inequalities in the labor market based on perceptions of realistic opportunities.

## The Dispositional Measure of Employability

The Dispositional Measure of Employability (DME), constructed and validated by Fugate and Kinicki (2008), was selected for its focus on characteristics predisposing individuals to employability, emphasizing proactive adaptability to work and careers in a constantly changing labor market. Like the self-perception of employability scale, the DME has a multidimensional structure, including: openness to changes at work, work and career proactivity, career motivation, work and career resilience, optimism at work, and work identity. It also reflects employability in the literature, in this case, embedded more within applied psychology and vocational counseling.

Table 7

*Survey Results: Openness to Changes at Work*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“I feel changes at work generally have positive implications.”	3.87	.57	3-5
“I feel that I am generally accepting of changes at work.”	4.12	.83	1-5
“I can handle job changes effectively.”	4.33	.84	2-5
“I am able to adapt to changing circumstances at work.”	4.40	.67	2-5

Participants reported receptivity to changes at work, with the majority of these items receiving a rating of “agree” or “strongly agree.” Consistent with interview findings valuing adaptability as a soft currency, the highest mean score in this category came in response to the statement on adapting to changes in work circumstance. This consistent emphasis portrays the liberal arts student identity in the context of a malleable narrative adaptively responding to situations at work. Extending this interpretation, if liberal arts graduates encounter stigma associated with a chosen major, they may possess the dispositional readiness to reframe their undergraduate degree program in a more positive light. Questions remain here about the strategies employed by individuals to successfully accept and adapt to change, important factors in the ongoing management of employability.

Table 8

*Survey Results: Work and Career Proactivity*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“I stay abreast of developments in my university major.”	3.87	.57	3-5
“I stay abreast of developments in my professional field.”	4.12	.83	1-5
“I stay abreast of developments related to my career trajectory.”	4.33	.84	2-5

Participants also tended to respond positively to work and career proactivity statements, although a distinction should be made that perceptions of staying informed of developments differ from the more active behavioral factors implied by “proactivity.” In this realm, responses may be biased by students with the initiative to self-select study participation. The item with the highest mean score and largest variance in this category was, “I stay abreast of developments relating to my career trajectory.” Distinct disciplines within liberal arts could explain some variance.

Table 9

*Survey Results: Career Motivation*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“I have selected a major that will help me reach my career goals.”	2.93	.94	1-4
“I have a specific plan for achieving my career goals.”	3.47	1.07	1-5
“I have sought training beyond coursework to help reach my career goals.”	3.73	.87	1-5

Variation regarding having a “specific plan” emerges here as a significant point, recalling differences in the presentation of participants who had accumulated multiple aspiration-related work experiences and those with limited, non-aspirational work experience. Those with abundant relevant work experiences seemed to have set in motion a future plan, communicated with confidence and with reference to professional connections. Variability in the other two statements is also remarkable, perhaps, for differentiating the two groups. The lower mean score for “selected a major that will help

me” conveys ambivalence about perceptions of employability attached to the chosen major.

Table 10

*Survey Results: Work and Career Resilience*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“I am optimistic about my future career opportunities.”	4.10	.76	2-5
“I feel I am a valuable employee in an internship or work-based setting.”	4.57	.57	3-5
“I have control over my career opportunities.”	4.00	.59	2-5
“My past work experiences have been generally positive.”	4.20	.61	3-5
“I take a positive attitude towards my work.”	4.53	.51	3-5

Participants responded positively to statements on work and career resilience. Similar to discussion of intrinsic values related to work and success, they identified as “a valuable employee” and positively assessed past work experiences and attitudes toward work. In keeping with the concern over societal perceptions and reluctance to speak to labor market conditions, they were less certain of having control over career opportunities. Given the limited labor market knowledge expressed, lower perceptions of control could be explained by a nebulous understanding of the economic system.

Table 11

*Survey Results: Optimism at Work*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.”	2.93	.94	1-4
“I always look on the bright side of things.”	3.47	1.07	1-5
“I am a believer that ‘every cloud has a silver lining.’”	3.73	.87	1-5

Participants offered a tempered response to “optimism at work.” This category had the lowest mean responses in the inventory, especially in answer to the statement, “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.” The optimism captured by self-identified resilience factors contrasts with this bleaker outlook.

Table 12

*Survey Results: Work Identity*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
“I define myself by the work I do.”	4.00	.91	3-5
“I am involved in my work.”	4.33	.61	1-5
“It is important to me that others think highly of my job.”	4.00	.87	3-5
“It is important to me that I am successful in my job.”	4.70	.47	4-5
“The type of work I do is important to me.”	4.53	.51	4-5
“It is important to me that I am acknowledged for my job successes.”	3.97	.85	2-5

Participants reported a positive working identity, desiring to be successful and viewing work as important. Again, these results echo the findings in the interview section on the intrinsic value they attach to success. They were positive yet less emphatic that it was important to be acknowledged for job success. For participants in this study, their working lives were still emergent as school remained a primary focus, so this category may change and become more relevant post-graduation.

### **Conclusion**

Surveys offer another perspective from which to view liberal arts student employability, but the small participant number limited opportunity for statistical analysis. Field observation briefly immersed the author in the cultural experience of students seeking career assistance with the obvious limitation that this method focused on students with a proactive inclination, since only students showing up for optional services were in evidence. These limitations strengthen the need for more rigorous empirical research on students’ employability concerns and knowledge.

Survey results tended to reinforce dispositional trends reported in the chapter on interview findings, but they also raised new questions on concerns not adequately investigated. The self-perceived employability scale added several variables of interest related to external employability and the DME provided an instrument well-grounded in vocational psychology, supporting the individualized focus here. Both surveys could be useful in career interventions with students as they learn the complexity of an employability narrative, modifying self-presentation in response to keener self and system awareness. Reflection on survey results could be used to draw student attention toward facets of employability not previously contemplated. An additional option for consideration would be the employability experience questionnaire (EEQ) developed by Yorke and Knight (2007) to identify student employability factors for pedagogical purposes, supporting personal development planning as an integral curricular focus. All self-reported employability questionnaires would benefit from university-based assistance, especially to facilitate self-reflection and constructive feedback.



## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

*“A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another.” – (Godin, 2009)*

How do the voices of liberal arts undergraduates contribute to the literature on employability theory, vocational psychology, and the future of higher education? In developing a theory explaining the social construction of an employability narrative for these students, emerging themes included concerns about distinctiveness, labor market utility, and stigmatization. Students struggled with branding, with some going so far as to reject the imposition of a commodity mindset that infused words like “brand” into their search for a job and vocational calling. Many made a point of differentiating themselves from peers in the School of Business. Students with more polished narratives, in spite of occasional reticence, tended to embrace branding to distinguish their applicant appeal.

This chapter compares themes grounded in liberal arts student dialogue to literature from multiple disciplines, addressing the interplay of individuals and systems in co-constructing the employability narrative. Tentative conclusions serve as a basis for further discussion as the field of liberal arts positions itself within a continually changing knowledge-based economy that is flexible, globalized, and less stable than prior eras. Transnational policies, like the Bologna Declaration of 1999, have responded to change by guiding higher education reform to increase job opportunities for labor market entrants (Neave & Veiga, 2013). This renewed policy interest reflects the magnitude of challenges recent graduates face. They are more likely to find themselves in the contingent labor force as temporary assignments replace secure long-term positions (Kalleberg, 2009) and job mobility continues to increase (Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015). With evolving variables and the shift from organizational to self career management, this dialogue is especially needed.

After a discussion of the study’s findings and relevant literature, recommendations for practice are provided. The chapter concludes by revisiting the purpose of the study and highlighting the need for further work relating employability to the paths and perspectives of liberal arts majors.

## **The Contribution of the Liberal Arts Perspective to the Employability Construct**

Of studies focusing on this construct, Fugate et al.'s (2004) psychosocial conceptualization of employability bears the greatest resemblance to liberal arts students' articulation of assets. The largest overlap here is the emphasis on personal adaptability, the dispositional attribute playing a central role in participant narratives and appearing as one of three dimensions in Fugate et al.'s conceptualization (i.e., personal adaptability, career identity, social and human capital). When asked about branding or self-marketing, participants repeatedly turned to reflective examples of their positive dispositions, e.g., open-mindedness and capacity to change over time. As the terms "employability" and "career adaptability" increasingly surface in higher education and vocational literature (Yorke & Knight, 2007), the resilient skills and attributes articulated by liberal arts undergraduates should be acknowledged for pinpointing central features of both constructs. The dispositional emphasis could arguably be indicative of a broader trend shared by employers. Brown and Hesketh (2004) reported employers' declining importance ascribed to academic credentials and increasing weight on personal skills and attributes.

Knight and Yorke (2004) offer a helpful explanation of "graduate employability" developed in higher education with an extensive list of core components, much of which is consistent with study participant dialogue. Their list divides employability into dimensions of personal qualities, like adaptability; core skills, like reading effectiveness; and process skills, such as ethical sensitivity. This framework adopts a holistic emphasis, compatible with participants' stated preference for being viewed by employers for their far-reaching potential rather than a reduced profile of credentials. To be seen in this light, students need the self-awareness, confidence, and 'know how' to communicate their perceived capabilities well. Literature on self efficacy (Turner, 2014) emphasizes the powerful role of self belief in vesting individuals with the confidence to apply disciplinary knowledge and skills to work, integrating academic and career success.

The prevalence of extra-curricular activity, explained by involvement with clubs, organizations, and study abroad in detailed spoken narratives, defines an overarching theme of pitching the well-rounded self to potential employers. Astin's college student involvement theory (1984) defines the value of co-curricular participation as a key contributor to student growth, grounded in evidence that students who invest themselves in these activities benefit proportionately with achievement. Indeed, many

participants noted appreciation for the Career Enrichment Network's support of extracurricular initiatives through resources and connections. This deeper involvement recalls Tinto's (1975) model of college student retention, seminal findings that students who persist in college are more likely to be academically and socially well-integrated, believing also that they are a valued member in their college or university community. In Milem and Berger's (1997) study of college student persistence, student involvement in the first six to seven weeks of a freshman's fall semester significantly related to persistence at the institution, results that raise questions about what could be done during this critical time to, particularly, increase students' career involvement.

A qualifier to these statements, however, must acknowledge that traditional models of college student growth and development stem from "typical" student profiles that may not fully reflect the unique diversified college campuses today (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). More attention is needed here to explore the varied co-curricular choices made by diverse students to increase job prospects and the extent to which they 'pay off' with chosen occupations. As noted in prior chapters, there is certainly concern for the support of employability development in college students from nontraditional social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, who may be limited by "narrow horizons for action" in the words of Redmond (2006).

### **The Employability Narrative as a Storied Career Intervention**

The methodology of this study embodies recent practice in vocational guidance based on the narrative processes espoused by Savickas (2012) in his theory on "life design." In this constructivist theory and practice, client-centered career storytelling is undertaken to strengthen self-knowledge, career awareness, and career adaptability. This type of career intervention employs autobiographical reasoning and identity work, according to Savickas, to construct and revise a narrative that would propel a client forward, bolstering positive self-belief and awareness of contextual considerations. In the new career paradigm, attention to overarching themes in a life story empowers the client with conviction and flexibility, a shift in focus from career assessment scores, traits, or types. With its emphasis on a search for meaning and constructed reality, Savickas's constructivist model complements narrative voices of participants in this study, particularly their inclination to stay true to themselves and self-described qualities of following passion and demonstrating adaptability.

Emergent liberal arts narratives also echo the archetypes of the “protean” (Mirvis & Hall, 1996) and “portfolio” worker (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). The protean worker carries a subjective orientation to *internal* rather than *external* career success, recalling the section in Chapter 4 on participants’ personalized interpretation of success. The portfolio worker emphasizes agile packaging and responsiveness on the path toward successful employment. Participants exemplifying the portfolio worker in this study seemed to be the ones who decided upon additional levels of degrees, enhancing and extending their narrative with discussion of a minor, second major, or area of emphasis. Recalling Ibarra’s (2004) concept of “provisional selves,” they seemed ready, even eager, to reinvent themselves for changing jobs in the future, showcasing different aspects of their knowledge and skill set as needed. In keeping with Brewer’s (2003) theory of optimal distinctiveness, they were poised to optimally balance inclusion (in this context, in-group association with disciplines) with the unique characteristics of a multi-faceted curriculum vitae.

### **Narrative Development, Marginalized Identity, and Systemic Equity**

In this study, students representing minority groups (racial/ethnic minority, international, working-class, and first-generation college students) were, at times, categorized as being on the margins for their self-reported minimal participation in career service activities, networks, and services. Their comments suggested they were lacking social and human capital, one of the critical dimensions of employability (Fugate et al., 2004). Some had not procured an internship, reached out successfully for help on campus, or tapped into professional networks to realize present and long-term opportunities. As a result, narratives were fractured by inexperience that could obscure pathways to aspirational employment. An exception would be the few who had succeeded in acquiring aspirational work experience while juggling school and the temporary jobs necessary for tuition payment. They were driven by a self-identified strong work ethic and inspired by the opportunity to surpass their parents’ career achievement with qualifications and an expanded professional network.

The clearest example of elusive employment emerged in the stories of the few international students who volunteered to participate, representing a population often targeted by four-year universities to boost tuition revenue (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Hiring obstacles were real and perceived as employers communicated reticence, disinterest, or refusal. With these limitations, proactive adaptability becomes critical. It

is questionable whether these students are acculturated to boldly navigate the bureaucratic systems of school and industry, seeking out exceptions to the rules and applying anyway or forging ahead in the absence of similar role models. Particularly in liberal arts, these students reinforce the commonly asked question: Will the benefit of university credentials exceed the cost of the undergraduate experience?

First-generation college students also generated clear emergent themes in the study. They were more likely to be transfer students, adding to the transitions that must be negotiated. Although they took pride in their work ethic, perseverance, and lack of entitlement, each expressed vulnerability in recognizing they lacked privileged connections to resources, material and otherwise. This dynamic recalls Stuber's (2011) qualitative analysis documenting the experiences of White first-generation college students at a structural disadvantage in the college environment due to unfamiliarity with the informal practices that facilitate social mobility. The intersection of race and class should be further examined to explicate the full spectrum of disadvantage and privilege in this context.

Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue that "people construct their employability but not in circumstances of their own choosing" (p 227). Questions remain about the university's role investing equitably in every student's career-related efficacy and growth in a time of mass higher education. The decline of obvious and predictable career trajectories highlights the importance of promoting positive self-efficacy in well-integrated university-based career services for the duration of a student's enrollment and beyond. Empowering student services, like the Honors College, are promoted as equal access with publicly available procedures for application and admittance. Once admitted, students can access a vast range of employability-enhancing benefits, such as funds for study abroad and internship placement. Of note, honors colleges have quadrupled nationally in the last 40 years (Kimball, 2014). The question remaining is, for the majority of students not admitted, could they receive comparable employability-enhancing benefits cobbling together other student services? In the Bourdieusian (1971) critique of higher education, positional differences in cultural capital assume class-based inequity unless strategically countered by the institution.

## Recommendations for Practice

### For Students

To succeed in contemporary career practices, students need to reorient from a focus on self-interests to a plan promoting what they offer potential employers. Based on study findings, self-reported approaches to career advancement require skilful initiative, underscoring the importance of strategically projecting what Brown and Hesketh (2004) term “soft currencies” and the “economy of experience.” Amply employed students composed and revised résumés, revisiting them to gain practice explaining their sequence of positions in an interview setting. Starting early in college, they gained experience with application success and failure. Using words like “focus” and “practical,” they became aware of the seasonal patterns in internship application deadlines, poised to improve for a second attempt after failure occurred the first. Students lacking the experiential learning of work and application-to-work practice seemed to be at a steep disadvantage. They had less to say and less practice saying it.

In spite of the vast change that has taken place in the technology of the job search, the résumé (or curriculum vitae) appeared to play an essential role in career development, giving proactive students the opportunity to document, rehearse, evaluate, share, and reflect. Cultivating a brand for individual employability could originate in this process of reviewing accomplishments and strategically deciding what to emphasize. For first-generation college students, perceived disadvantages could merit distinction if “successfully packaged” (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) to communicate skills of initiative, fortitude, and perseverance. Transfer students who excel in the transition effort could market their skilful navigation of institutional culture. In a changing economy, these habits of endurance become marketable assets.

For liberal arts students in majors with traditionally lower job-placement rates within the intended field, it may be useful to think of employability in terms of a well-integrated narrative that anticipates and counteracts negative stereotypes. In the absence of prescribed instruction that details the normative course of a discipline-based career pathway (the case for many of the participants in this study), liberal arts students would benefit from extensive integration of employability into curricular and co-curricular activities to connect skills, attributes, and experiences for a compelling narrative. This holistic development should be accompanied by a clarification of graduate employability. Pool and Sewell’s (2007) “CareerEDGE” may be most accessible

to students. Their model explains employability in terms of the self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem gained from reflecting on and evaluating: career development learning; work and life experience; and degree specific knowledge, understanding, and skills.

Although the findings in this study are not generalizable, they do suggest that liberal arts students' expression of attributes may come across more strongly than their articulation of skills. Ongoing career consultations with possible mentors could address concerns or disparity, particularly for those in disciplines historically separated from vocational priorities. Career interventions should expand students' notion of employability to emphasize knowledge, skills, and attributes for self-promotion that extend well beyond degree identification.

### **For University Personnel**

This process of catalyzing self-awareness and synthesizing experiences to develop employability narratives does not happen in a vacuum. It is a dialogic, social construction imploring professional career assistance as students translate their storied past into a recognizable pitch to employers, a challenge that extends well beyond traditional focus on major selection and résumé critiques. At present, only 17% of recent graduates describe their college or university's career services office as "very helpful" according to a Gallup-Purdue Index Report (2016), although that percentage has not changed much in decades of Gallup polling. To offer evidence-informed education and services, faculty members, advisors, and career services professionals should focus on developing the soft skills identified by employers as top attributes in yearly data published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016). This survey cites leadership as the top attribute sought by 80.1% respondents, followed by ability to work on a team (78.9%), written communication skills (70.2%), and problem-solving (70.2%). Participants with distinctive narratives emphatically recognized the importance of these skill areas and tended to attribute their progress in them to extracurricular and work experiences with the exception of written skills, acknowledged to be well honed in coursework.

It is important for employability skills and attributes to be integrated throughout the college experience rather than concentrated in the final year or two. Support services (e.g., Career Enrichment Network) are most effective when introduced early in the college experience and blended with instruction and academic advising (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005). Faculty may need assistance recognizing ways in which explicit employability development aligns with and complements course objectives, coordinating efforts with career services to offer applied learning opportunities, develop sought-after competencies, and secure work placements. Knight and Yorke (2004) clarify this process in their outline of employability integration for university personnel with an emphasis on personal development planning. In this framework, employability is viewed as a learning outcome and courses are examined for vocational relevance. University mentors are encouraged to work with students on identification of needs, review of progress, critical self-reflection, and representation of achievements. Student self-perceptions, vital to the career self-efficacy discussed in Chapter 2, can be improved with “encouraging, prompt, and detailed feedback” (Colbeck, Cabrera, & Terenzini, 2001, p. 188).

Given widening participation in higher education, employing a narrative approach to career planning and counseling has been recommended for inclusion of culturally diverse groups. Narrative counseling offers an alternative to traditional models built according to past demographic norms for college students (Clark, Severy, & Shanaz, 2004). Encouraging a self-driven narrative must be coupled with helping nontraditional students acquire paid aspirational work experience (Chillas, Marks, & Gallow, 2015), with the help of employers, and engaging them in the discursive construction of employability. As study participants seemed to already grasp, the internship model in the United States is treated as “an extended interview process” and should offer an equitable opportunity as it becomes a “rite of passage to certain professions” (Helyer & Lee, 2014, p. 354). Prioritizing the acquisition of work-based learning opportunities for *all* students avoids the pitfall of estranged students resigned to the unpaid internship, a burden for the economically disadvantaged struggling to balance part-time employment with coursework (Allen, 2013).

Faculty and staff should help students employ critical thinking skills to engage with work-based expectations by discipline. Interview participants rarely indicated knowledge or understanding of industry or organizational demands; survey findings reinforce this demand-side uncertainty. Liberal arts students may be predisposed with the right traits for employability and their responses frequently emphasized values and behaviors desirable to employers, such as open-mindedness and positivity, but they have not necessarily taken this narrative a step further to connect the academic, extracurricular, and work elements of the college experience for coherent self-



promotion. One may argue the extent to which the primary onus should be on the individual to achieve this professional voice and understanding, but students do need to be equipped with skills to initiate the process of making the case for personal employability. Literature on university-based career interventions clearly underscores the importance of students' interdependent support networks (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore what it is like for liberal arts undergraduates to think about and plan for employment and employability in the final years approaching graduation. The concept of the employability narrative explains how students make sense of their position and synthesize experiences to achieve a labor market advantage. Narrative expression and interpretation orients them to the world of work and, for students with ambiguous aspirations, may reveal perceptions of unease and uncertainty in the crafting of a comprehensible message. For career mentors, helping to resolve these concerns would naturally follow.

The chosen open-ended methodology allowed authentic voices to direct the flow of conversation, grounding abstracted theory in student language and concerns. With so many conflicting variables at play and so few prior opportunities taken to practice their pitch, students appeared to benefit from the reflective practice of applying meaning to their employability. As fragments of stories came together, for some in a marketable delivery, the process brought attention to the potential of self-authoring an “employability narrative.”

In total, 32 interviews, 60 surveys, and field observation culminated in this exploratory analysis. Findings support the understanding of ‘employability’ as a complex, continually evolving construct, mirroring the volatile labor market upon which it is based. They reveal themes of students' internal negotiation of employability, cognizant of factors that aid, constrain, and stigmatize. Previous research has not explored employability through the lens of contemporary liberal arts students and the topic merits further examination of their varied perspectives, trajectories, and outcomes, particularly given the uncertain labor market and the common circumstance of applying for positions that only tangentially relate to coursework studied. Accounting for differences within this large population, further attention is needed to understand paths

based on discipline and demographic variables such as class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and disability between and within disciplines.

Employment has been positively correlated with aspects of well-being (Wanberg, 2012) and is generally regarded as a public good. Technological change has contributed to the insecurity of employment, though, and the most relevant demand for future skills can no longer be reliably predicted (Helyer & Lee, 2014). Spells of unemployment are stressful and increase the likelihood of extended unemployment in later years (Bell & Blanchflower, 2010). For all of these reasons, variables related to reemployment success should also be targeted in studying liberal arts students and graduates, such as their career planning, job search intensity, and decision-making (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999). Future research would benefit from an integrative approach examining the psychological and social variables that propel employability narratives toward career fulfillment.

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## Appendix A: Approval for Use of Human Research Subjects

### EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

**Date:** September 28, 2015

**From:** Jodi Mathieu, IRB Analyst

**To:** Jennifer Nicholas

Type of Submission:	<b>Initial Study</b>
Title of Study:	The Employability Narratives of Liberal Arts Undergraduates: A Grounded Theory Study
Principal Investigator:	Jennifer Nicholas
Study ID:	STUDY00003432
Submission ID:	STUDY00003432
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview and Survey Questions.docx (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument</li> <li>• Jennifer Nicholas (9-25-15), Category: IRB Protocol</li> </ul>

The **Office for Research Protections** determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the **Office for Research Protections** closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the **Office for Research Protections**, in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the **Office for Research Protections**.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

This correspondence should be maintained with your records.

## Appendix B: Pilot Interview Protocol Questions

1. What does employability mean to you? What do you think it means to this young generation?
2. What interpersonal skills contribute to employability? If you had to choose, what top 3 employability skills are most important? How would you prioritize these 3 skills in order of what you're looking for in a candidate?
3. What interpersonal skills are viewed as critically important for job candidate's to exhibit? For this question, please think of behaviors as observable actions, like smiling or nodding.
4. What interpersonal skill is difficult to identify in candidates?
5. Describe for us how the perfect hire would present himself or herself to you.
6. For this next question, we'd like you to walk us through your recruitment and selection process. What are the steps you use during recruitment? Selection? What training, if any, do the people who select candidates at your company go through to prepare for that selection?
7. Is your final decision more about gut instinct or ranking?
8. How does your approach to the hiring process today differ from what it would have been 10 years ago?
9. Please describe to us how you use behavior-based interviewing to gain an impression of a candidate's employability? What question do you ask that tells you the most about a candidate's employability? What do you typically hear what you start with "Tell me about yourself."
10. Can you talk about a time during the hiring process when a candidate communicated his or her interpersonal skills? How did that shape your impression of the candidate?
11. Of all the experiences a student has during college, from coursework to informal socializing and extracurricular activity to the summer job, which do you feel prepares students the most to get hired?
12. If you were a student going through the interview process today, how would you communicate your employability?
13. How do young adults adapt to the workplace culture?
14. We are doing research on employability and interpersonal skills. What advice do you have for us on how we pose questions to students about their employability?



### **Appendix C: Interview Protocol Questions**

1. What do you think of when you hear the term “employability”?  
Follow-up: Do any other thoughts or feelings come to mind?
2. When, if at all, did you first start really thinking about this concept of employability? Have there been key turning points or experiences that may have triggered a change of thinking on this topic?
3. What do you feel has contributed to your employability during your time as a university student?
4. Who, if anyone, influenced your growing understanding?
5. I’m researching the concept of the “employability narrative.” In your own words, what would be the story of your employability?
6. In college, you’ve had many different experiences. How will you bring together the skills and attributes you’ve developed to positively present yourself to employers? Has that preparation changed over the years? What would be your “elevator pitch” or marketing strategy?
7. What stories do you think you might tell a potential employer at an interview? If an employer were to say “Tell me about yourself,” how would you respond? What differentiates you from other job candidates?
8. Some people today talk about the need to create a ‘brand’ for themselves to improve employability. Could you comment on this as a liberal arts student? Any other comments on the employability of liberal arts majors in the job market today?
9. How do you intend to use your major(s) to your advantage in the job market? How would you describe the opportunities likely to be available to you?
10. What does success mean to you in your employability narrative?

Note: These questions were asked in a semi-structured interview format, so not all questions were asked in the same way or order to every participant. Follow-up questions were improvised to help each individual participant follow his or her train of thought.

**Appendix D: The Dispositional Measure of Employability**  
(adapted from Fugate & Kinicki, 2008)

Directions: Read each item carefully and circle the answer that best describes you. Scale: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

Interpret “work” broadly in reference to all your work experiences, paid and unpaid.

I feel changes at work generally have positive implications	SD D N A SA
I feel that I am generally accepting of changes at work	SD D N A SA
I can handle job changes effectively	SD D N A SA
I am able to adapt to changing circumstances at work	SD D N A SA
I stay up to date with developments in my university major	SD D N A SA
I stay up to date with developments in my professional field	SD D N A SA
I stay up to date with developments relating to my career trajectory	SD D N A SA
I have selected a major that will help me reach my career goals	SD D N A SA
I have a specific plan for achieving my career goals	SD D N A SA
I have sought training beyond coursework to help reach my career goals	SD D N A SA
I am optimistic about my future career opportunities	SD D N A SA
I feel I am a valuable employee in an internship or work-based setting	SD D N A SA
I have control over my career opportunities	SD D N A SA
My past work experiences have been generally positive	SD D N A SA
I take a positive attitude towards my work	SD D N A SA
In uncertain times, I usually expect the best	SD D N A SA
I always look on the bright side of things	SD D N A SA
I am a believer that ‘every cloud has a silver lining’	SD D N A SA
I define myself by the work that I do	SD D N A SA
I am involved in my work	SD D N A SA
It is important to me that others think highly of my job	SD D N A SA
It is important to me that I am successful in my job	SD D N A SA
The type of work I do is important to me	SD D N A SA
It is important to me that I am acknowledged for my job successes	SD D N A SA

**Appendix E: The Self-Perception of Employability Scale**  
(adapted from Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008)

Directions: Read each item carefully and circle the answer that best describes you. Scale: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

- 1) I achieve high grades in my undergraduate studies. SD D N A SA
- 2) I regard my academic work as a top priority. SD D N A SA
- 3) Employers are eager to employ graduates from my university. SD D N A SA
- 4) The status of this university is a significant asset to me in job seeking. SD D N A SA
- 5) Employers specifically target this university to recruit individuals from my concentration. SD D N A SA
- 6) My university has an outstanding reputation in my field(s) of study. SD D N A SA
- 7) My chosen major ranks highly in terms of social status. SD D N A SA
- 8) People in the career I am aiming for are in high labor market demand. SD D N A SA
- 9) My degree is seen as leading to a specific career generally perceived as desirable.  
SD D N A SA
- 10) There is generally a strong demand for graduates at the present time. SD D N A SA
- 11) There are plenty of job vacancies in the geographical area where I am seeking.  
SD D N A SA
- 12) I can easily find out about opportunities in my chosen field. SD D N A SA
- 13) The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for.  
SD D N A SA
- 14) I am confident of success in job interviews and recruiting events. SD D N A SA
- 15) I could get any job as long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant.  
SD D N A SA
- 16) I want to be in a position to do mostly work that I really like. SD D N A SA
- 17) I am satisfied with the progress I have made meeting my goals for the development of new skills. SD D N A SA
- 18) I have clear goals for what I want to achieve in life. SD D N A SA
- 19) I regard myself as highly ambitious. SD D N A SA
- 20) I feel it is urgent that I get on with my career development. SD D N A SA
- 21) What I do in the future isn't really important. SD D N A SA
- 22) I tell my friends that this is a great university to attend. SD D N A SA
- 23) I find that my values and this university's values are very similar. SD D N A SA
- 24) I am proud to tell others that I am at this university. SD D N A SA
- 25) Being at this university inspires my best academic performance. SD D N A SA

26) I am glad I chose this university over others I considered. SD D N A SA

27) I care about this university and its future. SD D N A SA

28) For me, this is the best of all universities to attend. SD D N A S

## **VITA OF JENNIFER M. NICHOLAS**

### **Education**

Ph.D. Candidate, Workforce Education and Development (2012-present)  
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Master of Arts, Adult Education and Training (2006)  
Seattle University, Seattle, WA

Bachelor of Arts, Human Development and Social Relations (1999)  
Earlham College, Richmond, IN

### **Professional Experience**

Professional Development Instructor (2012–present)  
Professional Personnel Development Center  
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

ABE/GED Department Head (2008-2010)  
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