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Employability, Career Readiness, and soft Skills in U.S. Higher Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Given the large financial and time burdens placed on students pursuing a post-secondary degree, universities and colleges can no longer ignore their role in developing graduate employability. For decades higher education in the United States has grappled with preparing graduates for the labor market, creating a liberal education-vocation dichotomy. Yet, a recent literature review suggests that discourse on this topic has shifted. However, this shift is not without its challenges. This paper summarizes the current literature on employability – what it is, why it's important, its drawbacks, and its efficacy in the context of the U.S. higher education system.

Keywords: employability, career readiness, soft skills, U.S. higher education, liberal education, liberal arts colleges, First Destination Survey

Introduction

For decades the U.S. higher education system has prepared graduates for the labor market as its sole purpose. Academics have traditionally pushed back against such an agenda, favoring the notion that higher education is meant to be separate from the labor market and in favor of preparing students for life, not just employment. This disagreement is referred to as the liberal education-vocation dichotomy and a recent literature review suggests that the discourse on this topic has shifted. The rise in tuition costs and student debt have caused concerns around equity and social mobility. Increasing competition for a declining traditional student population has contributed to this shift. A changing economy and labor market that requires a more flexible and adaptable workforce and criticisms from employers and industry leaders for failing to prepare students adequately have also put pressure on institutions. Given the large financial and time burdens placed on students pursuing a post-secondary degree, it is no longer ethical for institutions to ignore their role in developing graduate employability.

This paper summarizes the current literature on employability – what it is, why it's important, its drawbacks, and its efficacy in the context of the U.S. higher education system. This paper contributes to the topic of employability in U.S. higher education where the sheer size, diversification, and decentralization of the system has created a muddled discourse on the issue. The paper will begin with an overview of the current higher education landscape, followed by definitions of key terms and employability's importance. It will then address the concerns of the agenda as a driving purpose of higher education and how effective employability has been in practice. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Background

The debate on whether preparing graduates for employment is a purpose of higher education goes back hundreds of years. In the early 19th century, William von Humboldt pushed

back against a vocational training agenda in Germany by arguing that the university's purpose was to pursue truth through research and teaching and knowledge's sake (Sin et al., 2019). Known as the Humboldtian ideal of higher education, he argued higher education should be kept separate from society to maintain its critical conscience (Sin et al., 2019). In the United States, the liberal education agenda has prevailed (Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019). Derived from Greek and Roman ideals, liberal education is supposed to "bring about the improvement, discipline or free development of the mind or spirit" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Yet, liberal education has come under intense scrutiny as its contributions to an increasingly industrialized and knowledge economy are questioned (Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019).

Massification and the Neoliberal Reimagining of Higher Education

Before World War II, higher education in the U.S. was an elite system that served only the wealthy (Brint & Clotfelter, 2016; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019). Beginning with the G.I. bill in 1944, higher education expanded significantly due to broadening federal financial aid for veterans and, in subsequent policies, students who needed aid to pursue post-secondary education (Brint & Clotfelter, 2016; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019). Brint and Clotfelter (2016) argue that this massification of higher education from an elite to a universal system was partly due to policymakers recognizing that the future workforce would need higher levels of education and more specialized skill sets for the nation to remain globally competitive. This new purpose of higher education to produce skilled workers is at the heart of the neoliberal reimagining of universities and colleges. (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2017; Moner et al., 2020; Young, 2020, Boden & Nedeva, 2010). The human capital development theory prevails in the neoliberal higher education setting, which argues that post-secondary education is meant to help workers get the skills and knowledge they need to be more productive, thus increasing the nation's prosperity (Beyrouti, 2017; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Moner et al., 2020; Young, 2020).

The Demand for Return on Investment

With the growing student debt in the last two decades, the public has demanded more accountability from higher education institutions by return on investment (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018). This skepticism stems from an increase in the overall cost of higher education in terms of money and time spent by individual students to earn a degree, in contrast to a decrease in the value of that degree in terms of immediate earnings and employability after graduation (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019). Liberal arts colleges have been most heavily scrutinized, as the direct link to employment is much less clear (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019; Moner et al., 2020). This scrutiny has resulted in some state legislatures increasing funding to colleges and universities that offer fields of study more tied to particular professions and reducing support for liberal arts and humanities programs (Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019). While there is extensive literature and data to show that those with higher education degrees earn more over time, students and parents demand institutions show how they support students' and graduates' employability (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019; Moner et al., 2020).

What is Employability?

The literature suggests no universally agreed-upon definition of employability (Harvey, 2001; Cranmer, 2006; Yorke, 2006; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Chadha & Toner, 2017; Clarke,

2018; Sin et al., 2019; Young, 2020). The lack of a definition globally and at the institutional level can cause problems in how employability is viewed, measured, and effectively implemented both by institutions and external stakeholders (Harvey, 2001; Cranmer, 2006; Yorke, 2006; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Chadha & Toner, 2017; Clarke, 2018; Sin et al., 2019; Young, 2020). Bridgstock and Jackson (2019), for example, argue that because institutions are unable to come to a consensus on a definition of employability internally, they pursue different strategies that dilute resources and affect efficacy. Divan et al. (2019) studied how universities' conflicting definitions and messages on employability between internal and external stakeholders can misinform and mislead potential and current students and impact their ability to operationalize employability effectively. This section will summarize the literature on how employability is defined in the U.S. and provide alternate definitions used internationally.

Employability and Career Readiness

In the U.S., the term “employability” is not widely used (Vorhees & Lee, 2005; Chadha & Toner, 2017). Instead, the phrase “college and career readiness” is used extensively in the literature to describe the same phenomenon. The Association for Career and Technical Education (2010), in an article entitled “What is Career-Ready?” notes that in the United States, college and career readiness are combined and used interchangeably to describe skills that allow students to enroll in post-secondary education successfully. They argue that career readiness needs to be defined separately from college readiness and propose that career readiness is defined by three different skill sets, including: “*core academic skills* and the ability to apply those skills to concrete situations to function in the workplace and routine daily activities; *employability skills* (such as critical thinking and responsibility) that are essential in any career area; and *technical, job-specific skills* related to a specific career pathway” (ACTE, 2010, p. 1). They note that students will be unable to get these skills in high school and that further education and training will be required for most future careers (ACTE, 2010).

In a follow-up to this publication, DeWitt (2012) notes that employers and educators alike echo the importance of separating career readiness from college readiness because a degree is insufficient. However, there are disagreements about where employability skills are learned. College and career readiness are widely seen as a K-12 initiative (DeWitt, 2012). The literature is extensive on how K-12 educators, local and state governments, and employers can come together to better support students in these endeavors (DeWitt, 2012). However, career readiness has also become a more prevalent topic for post-secondary education institutions. Since the U.S. higher education system is so diverse and decentralized, finding a unified definition of career readiness is difficult.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) undertook this challenge and published a definition for career readiness. NACE (2021) defines career readiness as “a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college-educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management.” They have developed eight core career competencies, which include (1) career and self-development, (2) communication, (3) critical thinking, (4) equity and inclusion, (5) leadership, (6) professionalism, (7) teamwork, and (8) technology (NACE, 2021). This definition slightly differs from ACTE's in that its focus is more on non-academic and non-technical skills. This difference is not surprising given that the organizations serve different members and industries. However,

both organizations define career readiness in terms of skills that students must acquire to prepare them for employment.

Employability as a Generic Skills Set

The ACTE and NACE aren't the only organizations that define employability and career readiness in terms of skill sets. Employability, defined as a set of generic skills, is common (Beyrouiti, 2017), especially in the United States. Employability skills are also called non-technical/traditional/intellectual/key/personal/core/generic/transferable/soft/work/

employment skills because they focus on general capabilities that do not apply to any particular industry or job (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Holmes, 2013; Beyrouiti, 2017). Hora et al. (2018) define employability in terms of soft skills or “the social, attitudinal, and self-regulatory competencies or traits that allow us to communicate effectively, work well with others and persist in the face of adversity” (p. 31). Beyrouiti (2017) defines employability skills as “basic skills such as oral communication, reading, writing, and arithmetic, higher order skills such as learning skills and strategies, problem solving, decision making and affective skills and traits such as dependability and responsibility, a positive attitude and interpersonal skills, self-discipline and self-management and ability to work without supervision” (p. 394). These lists of skills are just some of many that exist in the literature.

Alternate Definitions of Employability

Table 1 lists common definitions of employability found in the literature in order of year published and describes how employability is understood and interpreted.

Table 1
Summary of Employability Definitions

Author(s)	Definition
Hillage and Pollard (1998)	“the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work” (in Clarke, 2018, p. 1929)
Harvey (2001)	Harvey boils employability down to the “propensity of the individual to get employment” (p. 98). He notes that this definition can be elaborated on with factors such as job type, timing, attributes on recruitment, further learning, and employability skills.
Yorke (2006)	“a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (p. 8)
Holmes (2013)	Employability can be defined as three separate approaches:

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- Possessive approach: “one in which graduate skills and attributes are treated as if they are capable of being possessed and used.”
 - Positional approach: “views higher education as a system that is so structured as to reinforce social positioning and status.”
 - Processual approach: “seeks to examine such interaction, particularly between graduates seeking employment that they deem suitable and those who are gatekeepers to such employment.”
- (p. 540)

Holmes argues that the possessive and positional approaches are flawed that institutions need to take the processual approach to employability.

Wolff and Booth (2017) “the ability to find, create and sustain work and learning across lengthening working lives and multiple work settings” (p. 51)

Clarke (2018) Definitions of employability vary and can consider employability as an individual characteristic, an outcome of labor market conditions, a measure of employment status, or an attitude associated with employment enhancing activities.

Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) Three definitions of employability that universities undertake:

- “short-term graduate outcomes,”
- “professional readiness, and”
- “living and working productively and meaningfully across the lifespan”

(p. 470).

Bennett (2018) notes that a definition for employability should include “work that has both personal meaning and societal worth” (p. 33). Clarke (2018) and Bennett (2018) also note that employability should not only be about acquiring a job in the short-term, but consider the quality of the job, whether it offers personal growth and satisfaction for the graduate, and the extent that a graduate can find sustainable employment. Clarke (2018) prefers Hillard and Pillage’s definition because it acknowledges individual attributes, the labor market, and the relationship between the two, which is often overlooked. Wolff and Booth (2017) and Holmes (2013) define employability as a lifelong learning endeavor and something that goes beyond short-term employment or skill sets. Holmes’ (2013) definition of employability is widely used, especially in developing new measurements and frameworks for implementation.

Holmes (2013) argues for what he calls a “processual approach to graduate employability,” meaning employability takes into consideration not just individual attributes, but also social and cultural contexts, as well as external factors that can influence the ability of a graduate to gain employment (p. 470). Furthermore, the processual approach to graduate

employability views it as a lifelong learning process, where graduates continue to learn and acquire skill sets even after they have graduated with their degrees (Holmes, 2013). Holmes (2013) argues that this approach to employability is the most theoretically sound and compatible with empirical evidence since higher education institutions do not control the labor market and cannot guarantee employment. Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) echo this sentiment and note the lifelong learning approach to employability aligns best with long-held and traditional liberal education values.

Moving Beyond the Liberal Education-Employability Dichotomy

Defining employability as a lifelong learning approach in which students develop a generic skill set has contributed to the shift found in the literature from a liberal education-vocation dichotomy to one of acceptance. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which represents over 1,400 liberal education member institutions, has been vocal in accepting employability. Unlike previous notions of a liberal education, the AAC&U (n.d.) defines liberal education as “an approach to undergraduate education that promotes the integration of learning across the curriculum and cocurriculum, and between academic and experiential learning, in order to develop specific learning outcomes that are essential for work, citizenship, and life.” The learning outcomes referenced in the definition point to knowledge and skill sets a student should develop, which include (1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, (2) intellectual and practical skills, such as critical thinking, written and oral communication, teamwork and problem solving, (3) personal and social responsibility, and (4) integrative and applied learning. This definition and learning outcomes are a great example of the blended approach of employability and traditional ideals of a liberal education.

The literature identifies two main reasons why employability needs to play a role in higher education. The first is recognizing the individual financial contribution by students and parents, and therefore their concerns around employment and return on investment (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019; Moner et al., 2020). The second stems from the evolved definition of employability as a lifelong learning approach already taught through the liberal education curriculum, and which is more beneficial to students as they enter a labor market whose jobs may not even be created yet (AAC&U; Hill & Davidson Pisacreta, 2019; Thorp & Goldstein, 2018).

Recent studies show that the promise of getting a good job and obtaining financial security are the most significant reasons today’s students enroll in college and are willing to pay high tuition rates and incur substantial debt. (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Cruzvegara & Chan, 2021). The Strada Center for Education and Consumer Insights (2021) surveyed alumni and found that only half of alumni respondents felt getting a higher education degree was worth the debt. However, that number increased eight times when alumni felt their college gave them the resources and support to get a job after graduation. Furthermore, Thorp and Goldstein (2018) note that shifting demographics in higher education emphasize the importance of the employability agenda as these new students do not have the same social capital to secure their first job. The authors argue that one of the ways American higher education can repair its relationship with the public is by embracing employability as a purpose and being transparent in how it achieves it.

As noted earlier, ACTE, NACE, and the AAC&U and their members have accepted

career readiness and employability defined as a set of skills students learn and continue to develop over a lifetime. They argue that the generic skills and competencies students learn in curricular and co-curricular settings already prepare students for the world of work. At the start of the century, Harvey (2000) wrote that higher education institutions need to be “responsive,” and their primary purpose has shifted to “transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities while simultaneously empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners” (p. 3). Furthermore, employers expect and want soft skills, which they see lacking in students (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Moner et al., 2020). These skill sets also benefit graduates, who are projected to experience on average 20 future job changes and need to be prepared for jobs that don’t yet exist (Thorp & Goldstein, 2018; Stebleton et al., 2019). Moreover, as Sin et al. (2019) have found, arts and humanities faculty were more open and accepting of employability as a skill set gained through a lifelong learning approach than its definition of short-term employment.

The Problem with Employability

Despite the acceptance of employability as a purpose of higher education, there remain valid concerns that need to be addressed. Most notably, the literature argues that institutions have been largely ineffective in producing employability outcomes and that employability does not address equity issues (Harvey, 2005; Cranmer, 2006; Bennett, 2018; Clarke, 2018; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Bridgstock et al., 2019; Divan et al., 2019). One of the reasons for this is that external and internal stakeholders want to simplify the concept of employability into what Harvey (2001) calls a “magic bullet” approach (p. 102). However, as noted in the definitions, employability is a complex and dynamic subject that isn’t only dependent on the institution but also on the individual, the labor market, and employers and their hiring practices (Harvey, 2001; Holmes, 2013; Chadha & Toner, 2017; Clarke 2018). Furthermore, employability does not lend itself to easy measurements, making it hard to show that it is indeed taking place at the institution (Harvey, 2001; Cranmer, 2006; Yorke, 2006; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Divan et al., 2019). Last but not least, employability may contribute to equity issues and the wealth gap in the United States (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Divan et al., 2019).

Limitations of Employability as a Skill Set

A growing body of literature warns of the dangers of defining employability strictly in terms of generalized skill sets. Bennett (2018), for example, warns that doing so means that these generalized skill sets can easily be ignored in the curriculum because they aren’t part of learning a discipline. Hora et al. (2018) also find an issue with the “Soft Skill Paradigm,” or defining soft skills as part of employability for three reasons. The first is that a focus on soft skills reinforces the “deficit model of achievement,” where a lack of a student’s achievement of these skills is used to explain their inability to persist or gain employment (Hora et al., 2018, p. 31). Another reason is that this model implies that acquiring skills like critical thinking or problem-solving is easy and can be achieved in two or four years. Lastly, they argue that the assumption of simply developing these skills is enough to secure employment ignores important outside factors such as demand in the labor market, job quality, and hiring discrimination by employers, which Holmes (2013) and Clarke (2018) echo.

Additionally, research shows no correlation or causation between developing generic skill sets and employment outcomes and success (Homes, 2013). Holmes (2013) argues that not only is there no consensus or agreement on these generalized skill sets graduates are supposed to

have, but existing studies have mainly focused on employer surveys and are subjective at best. Clarke (2018) also notes that there is little evidence that having a generalized skill set has any direct bearing on graduate employment success. Other factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity, social networks, and university status are more relevant to employment outcomes (Clarke, 2018). Stebleton et al. (2019) argue that students in the liberal arts are unable to articulate the skills they have gained and that a career planning course is required to help them make sense of what they have learned and how to translate that into the workforce.

Measuring Employability

Measuring employability is a difficult task (Harvey, 2001; Cranmer, 2006; Yorke, 2006; Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Divan et al., 2019). As noted previously, there is no universal definition of employability, and those that do exist are subjective and thus difficult to measure (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). One measurement that has gained much traction and is used by external stakeholders to evaluate higher education institutions is called the First Destination Survey. This survey measures the first job graduates secure some period (usually 6-9 months) after graduation. There is a strong consensus in the literature that this measurement is great for measuring employment: the acquisition of a job, not employability, or the potential to obtain and retain a job (Sin et al., 2019). Holmes (2013) notes that higher education institutions cannot control the economy or the labor market, and therefore should not be held accountable for employment outcomes. In addition, Harvey (2001) argues that employers “convert the ‘employability’ of the graduate into employment” and that employer recruitment is not always a rational and objective process (p. 102). Furthermore, a focus on outcomes in the short term could come at the expense of student interests, such as a focus on developing “employable” majors at the expense of others (Bridgstock & Jackson; Divan et al., 2019).

While the First Destination Survey provides a good snapshot of employability, there is consensus in the literature that other metrics should also be used to tell the story of employability. For example, Cruzvegara and Chan (2021) argue that universities should consider multiple metrics gathered during a student’s time at college, at graduation, and again five and ten years out. Metrics during college would include student engagement in career services, experiential learning, social capital, and career readiness self-evaluations. Metrics at graduation would consist of the First Destination Survey data, satisfaction with support provided, and academic alignment. Finally, they also encourage an alumni perspective five and ten years out on lifelong learning, academic alignment, social capital, and satisfaction.

Wolff and Booth (2017) have developed a new framework for assessing employability, called their Essential Employability Qualities Certification (EEQ). The framework's goal is to assess the student’s demonstration of employability – the knowledge, skills, abilities and experiences required for successful outcomes. They hope to establish a national framework recognized by employers and provide information to students, their families, and other stakeholders about an institution's ability to develop employability in its students. However, both Cruzvegara and Chan’s metrics and Wolff and Booth’s new framework are limited in their application. Because of this, Harvey (2005) recommends that institutions focus on communicating the activities that allow students to develop their employability rather than metrics.

Employability and Equity

Lastly, a growing body of literature raises issues on the effect employability has on equity and access (Divan et al., 2019). For example, Holmes (2013) notes that students from privileged backgrounds have an advantage and that employers continue to use discriminatory practices in the hiring process that disadvantage marginalized students. It is important to acknowledge this, especially in institutions' approaches to employability. For example, several authors argue that because much of the employability work has been delegated to career services offices at the periphery of universities, access to these services is limited to privileged students (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Bridgstock et al., 2019; Cruzvegara & Chan, 2021). Instead, they argue that embedding career education into the curriculum to normalize the career planning process is key. Bridgstock et al. (2019) also argue that internships are limited to students who do not have to work outside the home, do not carry additional responsibility beyond the required coursework, and can afford to take on unpaid internships for the sake of learning.

Rejecting the Employability Agenda

It is also important to note the literature that outright rejects employability as a purpose of higher education. This rejection is not due to the concerns mentioned previously, but rather that such an agenda limits the learning and interests of students to meet the demands of the industry (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2017; Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2020). Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn (2020) call this “commodified knowledge,” which they define as “learning experiences that have been selected with a commercial need in mind to the exclusion of other experiences retaining a critical dimension, thereby constraining the possibilities for students to enhance their capacity for critical reflection about their own needs or about the interests of others” (p. 416). The danger of the employability agenda is that it limits free thought and thinking that challenges the status quo (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2017; Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2020). Osborne and Grant-Smith (2017) ask, “Is there a point at which the goal of robust and critical education comes into conflict with what employers are looking for in graduates?” (p. 64). They are especially critical of unpaid internships, which they believe provide unpaid labor for corporations disguised as learning. The belief that employability should be outright rejected as a purpose of higher education is still held firmly in certain academic disciplines and needs to be acknowledged.

Employability through Practice

Traditionally, there are two distinct approaches to embedding employability in institutions found in the literature: curricular and co-curricular approaches (Clarke, 2018; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Curricular approaches reference strategies that embed skill development in courses or practices that embed experiential learning into the curriculum of a discipline. Co-curricular approaches reference strategies and services provided to students outside of academics that help develop skills, provide experience or expose students to the world of work. Usually, these are provided through career services departments on campus or service-learning and leadership opportunities on campus. There is an abundance of literature that tests and discusses various strategies and how effective they can be. Overall, the literature agrees that both curricular and co-curricular approaches have produced mixed outcomes (Clarke, 2018; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Bridgstock, et al., 2019).

However, as employability has become a more widely accepted purpose of higher

education, a growing body of literature argues for a holistic curricular approach to employability (Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock et al., 2019; Cruzvegara & Chan, 2021). Effectiveness and equity are the main drivers behind this initiative (Bridgstock et al., 2019). The authors of these new frameworks argue that employability embedded in the curriculum can address equity concerns mentioned previously (Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock et al., 2019; Cruzvegara & Chan, 2021). This approach can also be more effective because it helps engage students in their discipline of study by helping them develop their identity and purpose (Holmes, 2013; Bridgstock et al., 2019; Cruzvegara & Chan, 2021). Bridgstock et al. (2019), in particular, argue for a whole-of-course curricular approach, in which career development is planned throughout the entire program, starting from the first year to help students develop their identifies and career management skills early on. This approach requires much change within an organization, including top-down and bottom-up strategies and collaboration between faculty and career services practitioners (Bridgstock et al., 2019).

Recommendations for Future Research

There is a large body of literature published on employability and its role in higher education. The majority of the literature can be categorized in three broad themes: (1) literature focused on the complex definition of employability and frameworks for how to incorporate all of its nuances, (2) how to best measure employability and the challenges of doing so, and (3) strategies for how universities and colleges have implemented employability at their institutions, specifically around career development and experiential learning found in and outside the classroom. There are both qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in the literature, however many of these include only small samples from specific programs (Stebbleton et al., 2019), institutions (DiBenedetto & Willis, 2020), or specific to certain nations and their economic and political contexts (Sin et al., 2019) and cannot be generalized. As a result, this paper proposes several recommendations for further research on this topic.

First, additional research is needed to develop the concept of employability or career readiness, especially as a lifelong learning approach, in the United States higher education system that is separate from college readiness in the K-12 context. To date, much of the content on this topic at the post-secondary level has been led by professional associations, such as NACE, AAC&U, and ACTE. In conjunction, more empirical research is needed to best measure employability. While several frameworks and projects exist due to higher education and for-profit partnerships, such as the previously mentioned EEQ certification or NACE's new pilot project with Sky Survey to measure career readiness, there remains a gap for quantitative and qualitative peer-reviewed research. As technology evolves and more national data becomes accessible, conducting multi-year studies on employability should be possible.

Second, there is an opportunity for additional research on what employability strategies have been implemented and their effectiveness from an institution-wide, system-level approach. As noted in this review, there are new frameworks developed for re-thinking employability and how it can be better blended into existing purposes of higher education. Still, there isn't enough research on the application of these frameworks, nor implementation on an institutional level, as opposed to individual departments. This additional research can help inform the discourse on employability and career readiness in the U.S. by providing case study examples of employability in action.

Conclusion

There is an overwhelming consensus in the literature that employability and career readiness are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted concepts that cannot be easily defined, measured or implemented. Despite these challenges, universities have moved towards accepting the employability agenda by defining it as a lifelong learning approach focused on building generic skills sets, which fit nicely into existing ideals of liberal education. This shift is not without its issues, as concerns around measurement and equity prevail. The literature argues that universities and colleges pursuing the employability agenda need to agree on a definition, use additional metrics outside the First Destination Survey to measure outcomes, and implement a holistic curricular approach to achieve equity. However, more research is required to better shape the literature discourse on this topic.

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About the Author

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