Chapter 11
Learning to Work,
Working to Learn:
New Vocationalism and
the Economic Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The Great Recession of 2008 focused minds on many issues of the economy and of society generally. It also focused considerable attention on the workings and results of higher education. Students were faced with spiraling tuition costs, while graduates were looking at burgeoning debt and the diminishing life-long financial returns on their degree investment. These prompted a reconsideration of the economic value of the college degree and of graduate employability. This chapter examines graduate employability from a perspective of what has been called new vocationalism. The challenges and potential of new vocationalism are explored against the framework of students who wish to enter employment and who believe that it is their best interests, and in the best interests of future employers and of society at large, if they are better prepared for transition to the workplace. The chapter argues for a reconsideration of vocationalism and suggests ways in which a closer and more authentic connection can be made between what is learned and what is needed to empower new graduates in the work-world.

INTRODUCTION

Although there are different explanations of the causes of what has come to be called the Great Recession of 2008, there is unanimous agreement that it was unanticipated, that it changed the ways in which people viewed their future, and that its consequences have remained part of the fractured economic landscape (Horwitz, 2012; Stiglitz, 2010; Verick & Islam, 2010). For those in the labor markets, or aspiring to enter them, there has been a significant re-evaluation of employment expectations and a sense of a diminished future. A recent study noted that “when asked about the future of employment, college affordability,
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job security, retirement, and other tenets of American prosperity, more than twice as many respondents have a negative vision of the future… [20 percent considering that] overall job, career, and employment opportunities will be better for the next generation” (Szeltner, Van Horn, & Zukin, 2013, p. 20).

Recessions are characterized by increased levels of unemployment, but the nature of unemployment during the Great Recession has been unusual:

1. High unemployment has been persistent and recovery particularly sluggish;
2. New job creation has been weak and “an important concern for the strength of the recovery is that even if firms create new jobs, it may be harder than in the past to match workers with appropriate job openings” (Elsby, Hobijn, & Sahin, 2010, p. 30);
3. The structural mismatch between new jobs and suitably qualified applicants remains significant and is estimated to add about one percentage point to American unemployment figures (Elsby, Hobijn, Sahin, & Valletta, 2011); and
4. Continuing unemployment and structural mismatch have focused particular attention on the employability of new graduates and on the responsiveness of higher education (Grubb, 2004).

It is important to realize that there will always be unemployed – or involuntary underemployed – among college graduates, even in the expansionary cycles of any economy. Nevertheless, there is a strong argument for ensuring that all graduates entering the labor markets should be knowledgeable about their employability – the skills and competencies they possess and the skills and competencies required – so that they can make better work-related decisions, find productive employment, and achieve greater work satisfaction.

This highlights the distinction between employment (securing a position in the active workforce) and employability (the potential, or attractiveness, of those entering the work-pool). From an educational perspective, employability can be improved; however, many in the academy consider that a narrow, focused, and instrumental approach to employability is problematic. They argue that higher education should be about educating the whole person, not about training future workers. In a more responsive and value-driven educational system, however, employability can potentially be “about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’…. on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner” (Harvey, 2003, p. 3).

This chapter argues that the development of critical, reflective, and learner-centered employability should be a pervasive force in the educational process. In particular, students who have identified themselves as business majors should rightfully expect that the knowledge that they acquire will strengthen their employability, support their future employment, and empower them as future workplace participants. Increased employability potential has a direct and obvious benefit for students who graduate, but it also provides added value for their colleges, for the organizations that employ them, and for the wider community within which they are embedded. For education providers specifically, a greater appreciation of employability allows them to strategically realign curriculum and instruction in more relevant, creative, and effective ways.

The first section provides a framework by looking at graduate employment and employability, with a particular focus on business graduates. It explores what graduates think about their first jobs and how they understand their employability. It also explores what employers want from their new hires, how they rate them, and how these perceptions might better inform the academy about the nature and goals